

A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF THE SUFI PATH WITH REFERENCE TO WILLIAM JAMES' NOTION OF "SELF-SURRENDER" IN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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WILLIAM JAMES (1842-1910) IS BY far the most influential figure in the field of psychology of religion, a field which developed around the end of the nineteenth, beginning of the twentieth century within the then emerging discipline of *religionwissenschaft* or the study of religion. The psychological approach to the study of religion was an important shift away from institutional, doctrinal and collective social definitions of religion to a focus on the individual and his religious experience. The early psychologists of religion, William James, Edwin Diller Starbuck and James Henry Leuba concentrated on the individual believer and his conscious descriptions. James, in particular, was concerned with the phenomenon of religious experience.¹ He rejected the notion that biological factors are the sole determinants of religious experiences, and emphasised, instead, the primacy of psychological factors. What he was primarily concerned with was the "original experiences" of "religious geniuses" whom he considered pathological.² Therefore, it followed that the neurotic individual was the focal point of religious activities.

His model was a rather simple one. There are two types of religious people: the ones who live in a state of "healthymindedness" and the "sick-souls". The former are optimistic and regard sin, disease, failure and suffering as avoidable, or unreal, or both. The latter are well acquainted with the bitterness of failing to live up to ideals, and with the guilt that arises when one's own standards of judgement (irrespective of their source) are always present and self-accusing. There is a dialectical relationship between these two types whereby the second group is the response to the first one.

According to James, a split occurs within the "sick-soul" because of its inability to deal with external realities. This split involves great passions and leads to neurosis. Then the "sick-soul" comes up with a new system of thought and a process of unification takes place, uniting the divided self. For James, religion is the reconciliation of the split of mind and body.³ The "healthy-minded" people then accept this new system of thought and sustain it. James called the process of unification "conversion" and maintained that it results in: a) the loss of worry, b) an experience of truths not known before, c) an objective change of the external environment and d) an experience of happiness, ecstasy, peace and harmony.⁴

A prerequisite for conversion and the last step towards it is the relativization of ego-consciousness or "self-surrender". In a theistic context, this is a complete surrender of one's self to God. As a result of his self-surrender, the "sick-soul" experiences a conversion which reconciles his inner dividedness. He then begins a saintly life which culminates in mysticism. These mystical experiences, James maintained, are in fact different forms and levels of consciousness. In what follows, we will study the psychology of Muslim mystics, or Sufis, by discussing the stages of their spiritual development in relation to James' concept of "self surrender".

Using James' model, we would say that a Sufi is a Muslim who is not satisfied with the usual understanding and practice of the majority of religious individuals who live in a state of "healthymindedness". He breaks away from them and looks for the real meaning of faith which would ultimately bring him into the presence of God. A Sufi is a "sick-soul" who is troubled with the existence of so much imperfection in the world and since the average Muslim is not able to answer his "why's" and "how's", he turns to asceticism and mysticism.⁵ Once on the Sufi Path he finds himself torn between his spiritual longing for perfection and his physical and psychological limitations. He strives to forget everything except God; yet because of the very fact of his physical existence, he realises that his physical, biological, psychological and emotional needs occupy his attention and thus divert it from sole concentration on God. To overcome this obstacle, every school of Sufism has constructed a method through which the seeker (*tālib*) would be able to work towards perfection and attainment of enlightenment.⁶

In Sufism, the mystical Path has different stations, and within each station there are different stages or states:

The main steps are always repentance, trust in God, and poverty, which may lead to contentment, to the different degrees of love, or to gnosis, according to the mental predilection of the wayfarer.⁷

For spiritual progress to take place, there must be an establishment of affinity between a master and his disciple. This is an important psychological point and

Sufi masters have always been aware of it. In order to test this affinity, masters used to require three years of service: one year was in the service of people, the second year was in the service of God, and in the last year the adept had to watch over his own heart. It was only when these three years had successfully passed that the adept could be formally accepted into a master's circle. This formal establishment of trust gives the Sufi shaykh the comfortable position of a master who "interprets the *murīd*'s [disciple's] dreams and visions, reads his thoughts, and thus follows every movement of his conscious and subconscious life."⁸

Here is the point where Sufism and James' notion of the relativization of ego-consciousness most clearly meet. James maintains that before a religious experience can take place, a relativization of ego-consciousness must occur, which alters the inner state of the individual in a way that it is now capable of being overwhelmed by something outside of itself. It is not clear, in James' model, whether this relativization is done instinctively or deliberately. In contrast, the Sufis are very precise on the issue: one must make a conscious and deliberate commitment to bring about such a change. By following whole-heartedly the instructions of his shaykh, the Sufi puts this concept into practice and relativizes his ego-self by subordinating it both to God's Will and to his master's will. This process of relativization is the basic theme of Sufism and permeates the whole life of the Sufi. As Schimmel points out, the mystical Path is "long and hard for the *murīd* and requires constant obedience and struggle."⁹ This struggle is waged against the base qualities of the *murīd*, as well as his physical and psychological needs. Here the role of the master becomes very decisive and the necessity of having an affinity becomes quite clear:

*Under the guidance of such a trusted master, the murīd could hope to proceed in the stations on the Path. The sheikh would teach him how to behave in each mental state and prescribe periods of seclusion, if he deemed it necessary.*¹⁰

To intensify this obedience the Sufi shaykhs have emphasised the necessity of single-minded focus on God and insisted that the *murīd* should

*turn with his whole being towards God. Ikhlās, "absolute sincerity", and giving up selfish thoughts in the service of God are the basic duties of every mystic.*¹¹

If we look closely at the different stations and states of the Path, we can recognise the attempt for the relativization of ego self, even though it has been designated by different names. The first station, according to Schimmel, is *tauba* (repentance). *Taubā* means to avoid sin and to leave all worldly concerns, and "can be awakened in the soul by any outward event, be it a profane word,... a piece of paper on which a relevant sentence is written, the recitation of Koran, a dream, or meeting with a

saintly person."¹² When a Sufi is in the primary stages of the Path, he is supposed to increasingly "give up this world," and, fearing God, increase in abstinence.

After being initiated by repentance and renunciation, the adept engages himself in "a constant struggle against the *nafs*, the 'soul', the lower self, the base instincts, what we might render in the biblical sense as 'the flesh'."¹³ An interesting point here is that the Sufi, being aware of the psychological fact that it is impossible to turn off the instincts completely, never intends to kill his *nafs*; rather, he tries to train it. This point has been beautifully illustrated in Persian poems by using the image of the restive horse or mule which is to be tamed by way of constant mortification and training. The means which have been used by the Sufis to tame the *nafs* are fasting and sleeplessness.¹⁴

The next station on the Path, as Schimmel suggests, is *tawakkul*, which means complete trust in God and self-surrender to Him. Even though the issue of whether *tawakkul* is an attribute of the faithful or a consequence of perfect faith has been debated ceaselessly by the Sufis, the importance of *tawakkul* remains unquestionable and the Sufi is taught to try to interiorize it:

*This aspect [interiorisation] of tawakkul is one of the basic truths in Sufi psychology: as soon as every feeling and thought is directed in perfect sincerity toward God... neither humans nor animals can any longer harm the mystic. Thus tawakkul results in perfect inner peace.*¹⁵

God, in His absoluteness, is the only actor, according to the Sufis, and therefore man has to rely completely upon Him; and since the divine power is all-embracing, man must have complete trust in this power.

The central attitude in a Sufi's life, according to Schimmel, is that of *faqr*, "poverty". Its root is in the Qur'ān 35:15, wherein a man in need of God is contrasted to God, the Ever-Rich, the Self-Sufficient. Outward poverty has been considered by the Sufis as a necessary station in the beginning of the Path, and they have tried to preserve it throughout their lives. They have even gone further and talked about inward poverty which means the absence of desire for the blessings of the other world, which is considered a much higher quality than outward poverty.

It appears that James was not aware of the notion and practice of inward poverty when he claimed that all religions meet in a "certain uniform deliverance" which consists of an uneasiness and its resolution:

*the uneasiness... is a sense that there is something wrong about us as we naturally stand. The solution is a sense that we are saved from the wrongness by making a proper connection with the higher powers.*¹⁶

step towards meeting God. In this regard, tribulations and afflictions are a sign that God is near, and as Maṣṣūr al-Hallāj put it, "suffering is He Himself."²⁵

Whether the final station is seen as love or gnosis, the disciple has to continue in his preparatory activities, like *dhikr* (remembrance) and *murāqibāh* (concentration), which may eventually lead him to the goal: *fanā* (annihilation) and *baqā* (remaining in God). *Fanā* has three stages.²⁶ In the beginning man becomes annihilated and takes on God's attributes. In the second stage the soul is surrounded by the primordial light of God, and in the third and final stage man is immersed in the "existence" of God. Then man may reach the state of *baqā*, "remaining" or "subsistence" in God, although some Sufis remain permanently in the blissful state of *fanā*.

Baqā is "concealed in the very center of *fanā*."²⁷ Rūmī the great Persian Sufi, compared the mystic in the state of *fanā* to a piece of iron that is cast into the fire and becomes so hot that there is no distinction between the two, whereupon the iron regards itself as fire. Throughout his journey on the mystical Path, the Sufi keeps on praying, fasting, reciting the Qur'ān and practising *dhikr*. These activities will intensify his devotion and speed up his progress on the Path.

A central point of the Sufi doctrine, as we stated at the onset of this article, is the relativization of ego-consciousness or self-surrender. As we have seen, the adept starts this relativization process as soon as he asks a shaykh to consider him as his disciple, and in each station its intensity and extent grows. When he performs repentance, he vows to obey God's decrees as represented in Islamic teachings, so he confines his ego-self to a great extent. In the next station he acts according to the principle of *tawakkul*, whereby he tries to surrender himself completely to God. When he comes to the station of love, there should not be anything left of him, and his last residue of ego consciousness starts to melt away until he gets to the point of *fanā* (annihilation), which has been called "the total nullification of ego consciousness."²⁸

The foregoing discussion leads us to conclude that James' definition of religion as emotions experienced by an individual,²⁹ and his understanding of the process by which these experiences take place—in particular, his concept of the relativization of ego-consciousness—accurately describes some aspects of the Sufi Path; and although it falls short in explaining some highlights of the Sufi Path, in general

This explanation or definition of religion does not really consider some of the later stages of the Sufi Path wherein the Sufi seeks no reward and loves God just because He deserves to be loved without regard for one's own personal salvation.¹⁷

Another station of the Path is *sabr*, "patience", which in the Qur'ān is referred to as the main characteristic of Job and Jacob, as well as the quality of other prominent prophets such as Ismā'īl and Idrīs.¹⁸ Patience is very close to obedience and means "to accept whatever comes from God," even if it is "the hardest blow of fate."¹⁹ Although *sabr* is an important station on the Path, a person who has reached the station of gratitude (*shukr*) is more fortunate, since he is considered to be already blessed by divine grace. The Sufis have divided *shukr* into different levels: *shukr* for receiving a gift, *shukr* for not receiving a gift, and *shukr* for the very capacity to be grateful. So the Sufi thanks God even when his wishes are not being fulfilled. Here again, James' idea of religious activity being performed as a means to guarantee personal salvation does not account for the Sufi's *shukr* even when his wish is not fulfilled or his hope is withheld. On the highest level, Sufis realise that even the capacity for thanking is a divine gift and therefore man must be grateful for the gratitude.

Gratitude is closely related to *ridā*. *Ridā*, according to Dhū'n-Nūn al-Miṣrī, is "the joy of the heart [even] in the bitterness of the divine decree."²⁰ In perfect *ridā*, the mystic rejoices over every divine decree, be it wrath or grace, and does not worry whether or not his resignation from the world, or his contentment have been accepted by God:

*This interior joy, this perfect agreement with God's decrees, transforms the beggar into a king and opens the way toward a participation in the divine will, toward love and 'higher predestinarianism'.*²¹

The last stations on the Sufi Path, according to Schimmel's description, are love and gnosis. They are sometimes considered complementary to each other, and at times one is seen to take precedence over the other one. Love nevertheless has been praised by most Sufis as the highest state, whereas gnosis has been seen as a prerequisite for the cultivation of love by many others such as al-Ghazālī. Again, on the question of what is love, Sufis have given different answers: some such as Yaḥyā Mu'ādh Rāzī, believed that "true love is to act in the obedience of the beloved,"²² whereas others such as Junayd²³ went so far as saying: "Love between two is not right until the one addresses the other, 'O Thou I'."²⁴ In either case, the only way man can draw closer to God is by perpetual self-purification, culminating in one's qualification with God's attributes. At this stage the Sufi welcomes suffering and even death, not only to comply with the Divine Beloved's decrees, but also because death is seen as the annihilation of the individual qualities and as the final

there is conformity between his theory and Sufi practice. This is, however, despite the fact that some Sufi masters would disagree with the idea of the Sufi being termed a "sick-soul" or being anything except "a psychologically normal person."³⁰

Our conclusion, furthermore, leads us to two final observations. First, the psychology of religion, mainly through the contribution of William James, has brought man closer to understanding religion than other academic disciplines. Second, Sufism is a viable form of religious experience which not only verifies the findings of the psychology of religion, but, by displaying realities above and beyond these findings, exposes the limitations of scientific inquiry into the mystery of man, while demonstrating the rich and dynamic nature of this spiritual discipline.

NOTES

- 1 Hence his main work in this field, in which his theoretical model is presented, is entitled *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.
- 2 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Mentor edition (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1958), p.24.
- 3 It is hardly necessary to mention that James was not concerned with the divine origin of religion and thus focused entirely on man. Consequently he missed the other side of the relationship which is the source and ground of being, i.e. God. What was important for James was the "fruits" of religion, not its origin. Hence we treat his formulation of religion only as a working definition rather than a theological statement.
- 4 James, pp.191-207.
- 5 Sufism is generally perceived as a type of ascetical mysticism, heavily tinged with the desire to forsake this world for the sake of the next. How well this perception fits the phenomenon of Sufism as a whole is a complex discussion, outside the scope of this paper. Naqshbandi-Mujjaddidi Sufis, for example, clearly do not fit into this categorisation. However, for the sake of simplicity we have treated Sufism here as it is most generally perceived, as ascetical mysticism.
- 6 Since the Sufi methods vary to some extent according to each individual Sufi Order, we will consider Annemarie Schimmel's scheme and presentation of the Path for the sake of convenience. See Annemarie Schimmel, "The Path", in her *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), pp.98-148. For another description of the Sufi Path, see Javad Nurbakhsh, "Steps of the Path", in his *In the Tavern of Ruin: Seven Essays on Sufism* (New York: Khaniqahi Nimatullahi Publications, 1978), pp.14-22.
- 7 Schimmel, p.100.
- 8 Schimmel, p.103.
- 9 Schimmel, p.106.
- 10 Schimmel, p.104.
- 11 Schimmel, p.108.
- 12 Schimmel, p.109.
- 13 Schimmel, p.112.
- 14 In the Mujaddidi branch of Naqshbandi order, fasting and sleeplessness have been subordinated to *murāqibah*, "meditation", following the example and instruction of Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī.
- 15 Schimmel, p.119.
- 16 James, p.383.
- 17 Moreover, James' discussion of poverty in chapters thirteen, fourteen and fifteen, which are entitled "Saintliness", show no sign of his awareness of inward poverty. His understanding of poverty is rather limited to its most common manifestation which is outward poverty. His observation that "Hindu fakirs, Buddhist monks, and Mohammedan dervishes unite with Jesuits and Franciscans in idealising poverty as the loftiest individual state," (James, p.249) is a good indicator of the limited nature of James' understanding of poverty.
- 18 See for example Qur'ān 21 (al-Anbiyā'), especially verses 70-90. It should be noted that the fact that Prophet Muḥammad is not specifically mentioned here among the Prophets whose

- patience has reached a remarkable level, is due to the context of the chapter which discusses the previous Prophets, and thus does not imply his inferiority in this regard. He is, on the contrary, declared by the Qur'an to be the paramount example of virtue and the supreme role model (*uswatun hasanah*) (Qur'an 33:21) and one who has the exalted standard of character (*khuluqin 'azim*) (Qur'an 68:4). Furthermore, the Prophet himself is reported to have said "patience is my garment." [See Gazi Muhammad Sulaiman Salman Mansoor Puri, *Rahmatul-lil-'Alameen*, A.J. Siddiqui trans., 2 Volumes (Karachi: Darul Ishaat, 1988), Vol. 2, p.363.]
- 19 Schimmel, p.124.
 - 20 Abū Naṣr al-Sarāj, *Kitāb al-luma' fī tasawwuf*, Reynold A. Nicholson ed. (Leiden and London, 1914), p.53; Schimmel, p.126. Interestingly, a well-known Persian idiom says: whatever comes from the friend is welcome. Even though this idiom is used nowadays in its literal sense by modern Iranians, it nevertheless signifies the importance of *ridā*, for the person who first formulated it and who meant that whatever comes from God is welcome.
 - 21 Schimmel, p.127.
 - 22 'Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī, *Nafahāt ul-Uns*, M. Tauḥīdīpūr ed. (Tehran: Enteshārāt-e Sa'dī, 1988), p.55; Schimmel, p.131.
 - 23 The famous Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 910), the undisputed leader of the Baghdādī school of Sufism.
 - 24 Farīduddīn-'Attār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyā'*, Reynold A. Nicholson ed., 2 Volumes (Leiden and London, reprinted 1959), Vol. 2, p.29; Schimmel, p.131.
 - 25 Schimmel, p.136.
 - 26 Another classification of *fanā*, favoured by more sober Sufis, also refers to three stages although in a different fashion, namely: annihilation in shaykh, annihilation in the Prophet, and annihilation in God.
 - 27 Schimmel, p.144.
 - 28 Toshihiko Izutsu, "The Basic Structure of Metaphysical Thinking in Islam," in *Collected papers on Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism*, Mehdi Mohaghegh and Herman Landolt eds. (Tehran: Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University Branch, 1971), p.50.
 - 29 A significant shortcoming in James' model is his failure to distinguish between "emotions" and "inner spiritual states," a distinction clearly recognised and discussed at length in Sufi literature. The ability to discern between these two types of inner experiences and guide the disciple away from the distractive grip of emotions is, in fact, an important function of the Sufi shaykh. Nevertheless, by focusing on inner experience as the key for understanding spiritual growth, James has helped to establish an important starting point in understanding the nature of spiritual experience.
 - 30 Javad Nurbakhsh, *What the Sufis Say* (New York: Khaniqahi Nimatullahi Publications, 1980), p.40.

