1991

The four doors of Islam

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PERTH   WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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By

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The science of the Sufis has no bound

A science high, celestial, divine:

In it the Masters have plunged profound

And men of wit appraise them by that sign

(al-Shibli)

INTRODUCTION

This paper — written after a visit in 1987 to the Turkish headquarters of the Jerrahiya, one of the Sufic brotherhoods of Islam — wishes to illustrate in a symbolic form one of the main aspects of this spiritual way representing a classical Sufic formulation of the path to God which is doctrinally and methodologically based on the integration of four levels of truth within the single unifying truth of the key formula "La ilaha illa Ilah".

In view of the subtlelty of the esoteric subject it deals with, the gnostic apprehension, which traditionally is recognised to be an activity outside the reach of the purely discursive mind, the author has preferred to avoid a strictly academic language and analysis, in an attempt to convey some of the richness and complexity of the spiritual meanings in a holistic, rather than analytical way.

THE FOUR DOORS OF ISLAM

In the centre of the ceiling of the hall of prayers, in the private mosque of the **Dargah** (Sufi headquarters) of the **Jerrahi** Brotherhood in Istanbul, recently renovated with astonishing skill by the dervishes themselves, is set a large wooden circular panel which supports the chandelier of a thousand lights illuminating the night prayers of the Sheikh and his children in God. At first sight the sculpture impresses for its beautiful craftmanship, the golden natural colour of wood, reminiscent of honey (and its Sufi association) and, especially, the integrating effect of the strange abstract pattern. This may remind one of the convolutions of a human brain as well as of certain meandric labyrinths in Malta — models of orientation and centricity — but at the same time is also suggestive of a symbolized human hand, or of the kernel of a walnut.

In reality this pattern, that is to be found everywhere in the Dargah in the ceiling of the Hall of Prayers, on all the lamps in the meeting room where teaching, interviews, sacred songs and the dhikr ذِكْر takes place, and even in the headdress of the Sheikh, the spiritual head of the brotherhood, is more than a simple anthropomorphic or natural symbol: this is indeed the key, written in stylized Arabic characters, to Islam itself and reads: **Lā ilāha illā Llāh** لا, إِلّٰهَ, إِلَّا اللّٰه , the **Shahādah** شَهَادَة , the Islamic declaration of faith in one reality, the singleness of Divinity[1]. Around this pattern there is a circular band in stucco, which also bears four sets of writings, four sentences in a classical Arabic script. Any dervish in attendance will be able to tell the uninformed visitor (who rarely is aware, unless literate in Arabic, of the meaning of the script of the central pattern) what the four sentences mean, and a door is literally open for the inquisitive person who cares to ask. Or better, a series of four doors.

The script in fact reads: bāb ash sharīʿat بَاب الشَّرِيعَة
(this is the door to Islamic orthodoxy), bāb aṭ ṭarīqat بَاب الطَّرِيقَة
(this is the door to Sufism, literally to the Sufi way), bāb al haqīqat بَاب الحَقِيقَة (this is the door to **Haqq** حَقّ
Reality, spiritual Truth), bāb al maʿrifat بَاب المَعْرِفَة
(this is the door to the Sufi mystical experience of complete union with God)[2].

The four doors alluded to are, of course, only one, that is the combination and merging of four different, deeper levels of the same methodology, which is enshrined in the Islamic **ashadu** (the declaration of faith: "there is no other god <u>but</u> Allah" (<u>if not</u> = illā إِلَّا) or: "there is no other god but God", "there is no other reality but Reality" which at the fourth highest level becomes "Reality is One".

So, the simple believer, the orthodox practitioner, will read and apply the single truth that only Allah is the real God, which is the basic and less profound level of understanding and, as such, the one which gathers most consensus among muslims.

On the other hand the sufi will perceive that in this statement the theological truth expressed and the method alluded to emphasize a universal perception of god, of the absolute, one on which all religions agree on (and we may remember some mystical poems by Rūmi and Ibn ʿArabi, expressing this perception of truth).

At the level of Ḥaqq حَقّ , the level of the advanced Sufi, the reading is that reality is Reality, a statement of the sacredness and totality of reality, beyond cultural identifications with personal gods (Allah, Jehova, the Lord Father/the Trinity...).

Finally, at the level of the adept, the realized Sufi, the method leads to the experiencing of the oneness of Reality, where also the separation from human and divine is overcome, the Beloved and the lover are one, the worshipper is but the reflection of the image of the Worshipped, there is indeed no separation because the one is contained in the other (the other is contained in the One).

THE FIRST DOOR: bāb ash sharī ʿat

بَاب الشَّرِيعَة

لَا : ‎لا‎   (not, there is not)

The first door is the hardest to open, this is like the hard wooden skin of the walnut, which must be cracked to reveal its inside, but which in turn has already been separated from the once nourishing, now useless, pulp of the outer fruit, the natural level, which is now perceived as the realm of the unbeliever. The believer, the muslim practitioner, is so like a walnut, but if this stage is never deepened, if the walnut is simply stored for too long, it will never fulfill the task of nourishing the spirit (the walnut will be kept, not eaten).

We are at the level of the protective involucre of Islamic orthodoxy, Islam as it is lived by the majority of the believers, the often simple, unquestioning faith of the millions who live in the essoteric circle (exoteric), the religion preached by the majority of Ulamas, from the fanatic to the strictly purist, the level of the external of religion (which is all the same so dramatically different from atheism and irreligiosity).

So, this is the first stage of separation (that is, from the unbelievers, the materialistic-oriented mankind), the state that truly corresponds to the initial negation of the ashadu: Lā ‎لا‎ (not/there is not).

Negation, rather than affirmation, is indeed the inner mode at psychological and spiritual level of this preliminary stage at which so many stop. Not surprisingly, this is also the stage that evokes the strongest and most direct reactions in the outsiders of Islam, and also in the newcomers, the new muslims (especially those from different religious and cultural backgrounds), and who find it hard to accommodate to the many limitations of formalized behaviour, and difficult to relate inwardly to the ritual shaping of daily life which Islam requires. In fact, this is natural, and unless one invests in the practice a personal and inner meaning, Islam is lived as a constrictive (to some reassuring) discipline. This stage attracts those who are of simple nature, who develop even remarkable faith, but have indeed very limited intellectual demands and capacity, those who rely more on morals than on inner guidance, who have little or no inclination for metaphysics, less even for mysticism, (which may be regarded with great suspicion), those who cherish simple, clear-cut truths and shun complexity, who demand certainty and are afraid of indecision, those who aspire to heaven and are afraid of hell... These people will simply settle at this stage for life, or more rarely, progress further. They will nevertheless harvest their rewards for their commitment and daily practice, their salvation and reward will be in the precincts of the outer garden of Paradise (the first of the four Islamic gardens) to enjoy the level of reality they have been attracted to.

This stage is figured also in the Islamic ritual prayer, in the preliminary posture of the standing worshipper who, with his hands raised in invocation of protection from the luring Satan (Hell, sin, the flesh, the world, materialism, psychological negativities and conditions...) prepares him/herself for the performance of the ritual prayer.

In fact, the ṣalāt صَلَوٰة , the ritual prayer, the standard cycle of four rak ᶜat or rak ᶜah رَكْعَة , can be perceived as representing the totality of one's possible inner attainments. At this stage corresponds the first of the four rak ᶜat رَكْعَة [3].

THE SECOND DOOR: bāb at tarīqat

بَابُ الطَّرِيقَة

إلَاه Ilāh   (god)

As stated, only after breaking the nut, shattering the defensive hard involucre of orthodoxy – the sharīᶜat شَرِيعَة – one can hope to find the much subtler shining, inner skin of the walnut which, like the **dura mater**, enveloping the brain hemispheres, protects the real substance of truth and allows some adjustment to traumatic shocks (perception of deeper levels of experience) as well as permitting growth (perception of deeper levels of understanding).

This is the stage of entering sufism through one of the many
living chains of transmission of method, the brotherhoods, or order
of Islam, the ṭarīqat طَرِيقَة (way). They only assure the safe
transmission and handing down of both methodology and charisma (in
the etimological sense of "spiritual blessing"); the barakah or
barakat بَرَكَة . The transmitter and depositer of both
instruction and spiritual blessing is the **Sheikh**, (Pir) پِير ,
the guide who is himself directly linked with the founder of the
Order, the prime transmitter of truth and good from the central
receptacle of wisdom and grace (rahmah or rahmat رَحْمَة , Divine
Mercy).

It is also the stage when one finds God in one's heart more
than one's spoken prayers. It is not, though, the truly esoteric
level yet, but merely the mesoteric one, the intermediate level.
Yet, only a small and thin partition divides one from the stage of
mystic experiences, and in fact already at this stage it is
possible, if not common, to have some glimpses of real truth, just
as one sees the shape of the inner nut through its shining skin, to
enjoy indeed a foretaste of ecstatic states (the aroma of the nut).
So it is the stage of identification (not any longer negation and
division), or of becoming identified and oriented to the inner
reality of Islam, of forming a "permanent magnetic centre" which
attracts higher materials, help and barakah. (This is mediated by
the efforts of the **Sheikh** who diffuses it by irradiation,
tajalli تَجَلِّى — from a mysterious central essence).

In the cycle of the ritual prayer, this stage is represented
by the recitation of the **Fatiḥa**, the "opening" of the way, the
all-comprehensive condensation of doctrine and methodology, the
stage of being able to talk to the Creative Source acknowledging its
presence and role as well outlining our own dependence and
aspirations.

It is also the stage of the breath of Life (**Raḥmah**) and of
the **dhikr**, the audible remembrance, which is alluded to by the
activity of rubbing away with one's fingers the walnut's shining
skin to reveal the nut, just as it is reminiscent in its repetitive
nature of the movements of the hand through the beads of the rosary
(**wird** وِرْد). These acts relate indeed to the rubbing away of
the dust of oblivion, ignorance and forgetfulness from the mirror of
the heart. Like the shining of Aladin's lamp, like the rubbing of
the nut's inner skin, these repetitive acts are not an end in
itself, they do have a purpose, they precipitate a crisis,
overcoming discrete levels. So the **dhikr**, ذِكْر , far from
being a meaningless repetitive act, does in fact achieve a result,
if performed in the right understanding and with the necessary
dedication and persistence, it does eventually precipitate the
collapse of previously acquired external and temporary truths to
reveal the inner core of esoteric reality.

This stage in the totality of its steps, is prefigured by the sequence of the second cycle of the rak a, while in its singularity it is represented by the recitation of the Fatiha.

THE THIRD DOOR: bāb el Haqīqat
باب الحقيقة
الا   illā (if not)

This is the true esoteric level, the inner, even if not the deepest stage of possible attainment.

It is only a thin veil away from the previous stage which it naturally completes, yet it is one that only few find and enjoy.... This is the stage of real mystical experience (states more than transient stages, permanent acquisitions, in Arabic terminology, maqam مقام not hal خال).

This is the tasting of the walnut, the pulp, the sublimation of aroma and taste.

It is also a strange stage because it belongs by nature to an intermediate world, an elusive and unstable level of confluent realities, a meeting place of essence and form, potential and manifestation, a merging together of different levels of reality, where the natural is visited and confronted by interpenetrations with the spiritual and even the celestial levels of realm (the various ʿālamūn عالمون).

It is the stage of barzakh برزخ , the isthmus of reality, the stage of distinction and discrimination between what is apparent and what is, the stage, properly, of illā الا (if not).

The isthmus, the meeting of sweet and bitter seas, as it is described by the holy Qur'ān قرآن represents the sweetness of presence and the bitterness of absence, the sweetness of union and the bitterness of withdrawal, but also the sweetness of acquired knowledge and the initial bitterness of real wisdom, which implies renounciation of preliminary truths as well as of previously satisfying states and experiences. By this nature, we are reminded by Titus Burckhardt (1976),- an isthmus both separates two lands and joins two seas: there two ways of looking at the same thing, two auto-exclusive visual perceptions of the same pattern, which must be brought together to show the real[4]. This is why this stage is alluded to by the use of paradoxical language, more than antinomic, of multiple symbols, not mere signs.

In the ritual prayer, this stage is represented by the first prostration, that is, the first meeting with the invisible God in one's heart, a perception of Presence. In the totality of its own steps, it is represented by the second of the three rak at of the evening prayer, preceding night prayer, just as afternoon is between morning and night, twilight between light (sweetness) and darkness (bitterness), the dark night of the soul which preceded the dawn of inner Light, the absence of forms which envelops the Formless Reality.

The danger of this stage is to get fixated in it, enticed for ever by the rapture of contemplation and by the bliss of spiritual experiences, one can stay in the celestial level without ever joining with the divine one.

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THE FOURTH DOOR: bāb al maᶜrifat

بَاب المَعْرِفَة

الله   Llāh (God-Allah)

</div>

In order to transform the pulp of the nut into ourselves and be nourished by it, one must eat the nut. It is the taking in of the essence of truth and goodness that annuls the separation between food and eater, contemplative and God, lover and Beloved. This is the closure of the cycle of prayers, the cycle of the out-breath of manifestation and the in-breath of return to the source, Rahmah رَحْمَن and Rahim رَحِيم the real essence of Rahmah رَحْمَة , Mercy, the stage of union in essence, whereas Reality reveals itself to reality, at the borders of the great mystery, the Unknowable, dhāt ذَات , (the unknowable mystery of Divine Essence).

This is the stage of intimate blending of divine and soul essences, where the latter becomes totally impregnated by the first, like the joining of red wine and water.

It is the stage described by the second and final prostration, and the completion of ritual prayer with the affirmation of the oneness of reality, the blessing to the Prophet (the human prototype of possible perfection, the Insān el Kāmil الإِنْسَان الكَامِل which stands at the barzakh بَرْزَخ , joining human and super-human realities) and the sharing of blessing with all mankind.

CONCLUSION

In these pages an attempt has been made to illustrate the single unifying doctrine of the **Shahadah (la illaha illa Llah)** as the central core of sufic knowledge and mystical practice, which are both based on the principle of the interpenetration of four levels of truth, from the common basis of the Shari ᶜa to the attainment of the gnostic union with God. This doctrine has also been related to the spiritual methodology of the sufis, the practice of ritual prayer and of the remembrance of God (**dhikr**).

The different stages of attainment referred to in this paper encompass the passage from the exoteric to the esoteric perspective which is the aim of all mystic paths.

NOTES

1. The **dhikr** or recitation of the names, or remembrance, is the main methodological technique used by Sufis to evoke the presence of God by recollecting Him in the heart. An informed and authoritative explanation of this practice is contained in the third chapter of Dr. Mir Valiuddin's <u>Contemplative Disciplines in Sufism</u> (1980). London: East-West Publications, The Hague. (p.32-50).

    The symbolism of the location of the calligraphic script is also of crucial importance: the lamps are suggestive of spiritual light, and the top of the prayer cap and headress of the sheikh indicates a subtle energy point as well as alluding to the development of mental illumination.

2. The terms **Shariᶜa** and **Tariqa** are often translated respectively as sacred law and path. The first teaches the muslim how to achieve proximity with God by discharging the obligations to God by service and worship, and also by fulfilling his obligations in relation to the community. This is the heritage of the knowledge of the Prophets and it is encapsulated in the teachings of the sacred literature of Islam.

    The **tariqa**, the Sufic path to God, teaches how to purify the lower self and cultivate the mental states which help blurring the attachment to the ephemeral (the 'cleansing of the heart') and prepare heart and soul to the encounter with the Divine. The key term **Haqiqa** is used by the sufis to refer to the gnosis of the Divine Names and Attributes, and to the science of realizing them.

    Finally, **maᶜrifah** is spiritual gnosis, which is total absorption in the Divine essence.

3. The ritual prayer cycle integrates different postures which have a highly symbolic meaning, with the recitation of prayers in Arabic. The positions are: standing (hands at sides, or raised in invocation, or clasped on the naval or the chest), bowing, prostration and sitting facing the **qiblah** (the direction of Mecca).

4. Titus Burkhardt (1976) <u>An Introduction to Sufi Doctrines</u> Chatham, Kent: Acquarius Press.

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