

# SUFISM AND ANCIENT WISDOM



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## INTRODUCTION

**T**HE AIM OF OUR monograph *Sufism and Ancient Wisdom* is to examine certain metaphysical and mythological patterns of Islamic spirituality, and to outline the soteriological strategies and gnostic attitudes embodied by those 'Friends of God' (*awliya Allah*) who can be placed under the general umbrella term *al-tasawwuf* (Sufism). Various attitudes of Islamic jurists, ascetics and mystics are viewed in the context of ancient civilizations and their spirituality.

However, this is not a comparative study in the sense of a cursory overview. Amongst other things, we try to analyze Islamic paradigms, mystical longings, rhetorical devices and religious myths as an integral part of the larger historical and metaphysical picture. With some minor reservations, we speak of the formally multi-faceted, but essentially identical, Middle Eastern and Mediterranean meta-tradition which is chiefly Mesopotamian and Egyptian in its ultimate origins, but which includes the monotheistic offshoots of the Amarna religion, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

True intellection (*noesis*) sometimes enables one to differentiate numerous works of self-deception and sleights accomplished by modern positivists in the name of 'science' and divinized secular 'history'. However, such a recognition cannot be blindly used as a pretext to change one's attitude into its complete opposite, since only metaphysical principles and devices of mystical rhetoric are reliable and acceptable, because these (or their styles of expression) can be contextualized and analyzed as manifestations of certain hidden premises, unconscious drives, onto-theological, political and socio-economical determinations, mental conditions and archetypal plays of imagination. Hence, neither religious self-definitions (self-pictures), nor theological constructions should be viewed as independent and self-evident edifices apart from their universal noetic foundations, esoteric contents and 'secret history'.

In this book, however, our aim is rather modest: to discern a few metaphysical and mythical patterns sufficient to show the common background and continuity (albeit through constant transformations and readaptations) of those socio-spiritual tendencies that may be attested from ancient Mesopotamia to the theocratic empire of Islam.

Regarded as the restored religion of Abraham (*din Ibrahim*), Islam forms the top of a huge and multi-coloured iceberg. Therefore, its theory of prophethood (the specifically Semitic conception, which is *de jure* metaphysical, but *de facto* constitutes the realm of Islamic mythology) in its potential application should not

be restricted to the limited world of a few Semitic tribes. For any Muslim scholar who treats the Islamic tradition of thousands upon thousands of prophets seriously (both in its symbolic sense and as an indication that *islam*, as the 'primordial tradition', is universal), neither ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian, nor Graeco-Roman spirituality, are to be excluded from the list of 'true' and 'revealed' religions.

Regarding ancient Mesopotamian civilization and the Greeks who were already significantly 'mesopotamianized' long before Alexander the Great, Simo Parpola has this to say:

'In reality, Hellenistic culture with its philosophies, religions, sciences, arts and institutions was essentially based on ancient Near Eastern cultural traditions, whose origins can, with the help of Mesopotamian sources, be traced back to the beginning of the third millennium BC, and even earlier.<sup>1</sup> The form assumed by Islamic civilization is of course the expression of its own unique revealed essence; but that form includes dimensions which were largely based on a readapted and transformed Judaic, Christian, Iranian and Hellenistic legacy in which different branches of Judaism and Christianity had themselves been strongly influenced by the Mesopotamian tradition. Although absorbed into 'an Islamic point of view', this material already came to the Arabs in new forms, the ties with Mesopotamian religion having by then been lost.'<sup>2</sup>

Some cultural forms assumed by the expanding Islamic faith are linked to the marginal traditions of ancient Arabia, which, even before the appearance of Christianity and Judaeo-Christian Gnosticism, were shaped at least partly by the same basic mythologems and cultic principles that constitute the Assyrian, Babylonian-Chaldean, Phoenician and Egyptian civilizations. According to Jaakko Hameen-Anttila:

'First of all, Islam developed in Iraq and Syria, in the very area where direct late Mesopotamian influence would still be lingering on, partly in the form of Assyrian remnants, like in Harran, partly in indigenous versions of other religions, like Gnostic or semi-Gnostic movements on the margins of Christianity and Judaism.'<sup>3</sup>

However, we are not overly preoccupied with 'influences' as such, and cannot accept the one-dimensional materialistic theory of 'borrowings', as if the immanent structure of the Islamic world were devoid of the divine intellect (*Nous*) and providence (*pronoia*). In this respect, our position is thoroughly Neoplatonic, although this 'Neoplatonism' is not to be restricted to its historical manifestations, but rather equated with the scholarly and metaphysical insight shared also by Sufism, in light of its hermeneutical ability to transcend all formal limitations of a dogmatic character.

These limitations are in common practice evident within Semitic monotheism, namely, the tendency to regard its own mythology as 'history' and to treat foreign hieratic narratives (those outside the Abrahamic stock, be they Hindu, Mesopotamian or Greek) as pure 'mythology' in the sense of nebulous tales, and a 'paganism' that must be rejected at all costs. However, as Peter Kingsley remarks while discussing the 'tale of the path' revealed to Parmenides by the mysterious goddess:

'We distinguish between myth and reason on the same basis that we

distinguish between fiction and fact: some things are real, others are not. But for the goddess everything, including her teaching, is what we now would call a myth. She is a myth. Everybody is a myth. You are a myth. And this is the truth.<sup>4</sup>

Obviously, one's reverence for 'tradition' should not be restricted to the privileged confines of one's own pious fantasies, even if they are regarded as spiritual vehicles activated by a sincere submission to an elevating sacramental force. Therefore, it is important to understand that Islam (including Sufism as its initiatic method of spiritual transformation), though essentially based on the Qur'anic revelation, is in many respects a prolongation of those ancient traditions of 'revealed wisdom' which cannot be simply abrogated or claimed to be 'inventions of the devil'. Otherwise our understanding of the past is seriously distorted, and we thereby tacitly allow those secular historians of positivistic inclinations to celebrate an alleged victory, and unjustly deprive certain respectable religious traditions of their existential justification, logic and wisdom. As Reza Shah-Kazemi points out:

'... given the clear errors that are paraded as spiritual truths in our time, the need for clarity about the meaning of spirituality can hardly be over-emphasized.'<sup>5</sup>

In the first part of our monograph, monotheism and idolatry in the context of Hellenic culture, Judaism, Christianity and Islam are discussed, as well as metaphysical and historical aspects of early Islam in its relation to its contemporary surroundings. Sufism is analyzed as a crystallization of Islamic gnosis aimed at the mystical interiorization of divine service and holy war viewed as a means of alchemical transformation on the path of remembrance (*dhikr*).

The second part is devoted to comparisons between ancient Mesopotamian and Islamic spiritual paradigms, myths and symbols related to covenant ideology and scriptural traditions. The archetypal and cultic patterns of ancient Arabic, Egyptian, Babylonian-Assyrian, Ugaritic and Jewish spirituality are analyzed, especially those related to the institution of prophecy, divine kingship, initiation and worship. The esoteric function of 'Ninurta's warriors' is treated within the context of Assyrian, Israelite, Arabian and Graeco-Roman antiquity. The *apkallu* tradition of Mesopotamian wisdom is compared with the Abrahamic tradition of the Ishmaelite initiates, thereby revealing their hidden connections and common ideas. Certain models and methods of Sufism – especially those related to ascetic practices – theories of *ubudiyah* and *walayah*, the mystical approach to the divine Throne, and many others, can be seen to be rooted in universal paradigms going back, through Christian, Judaic and Gnostic traditions, to ancient Mesopotamia, and beyond; thus revealing an astonishing continuity of various spiritual attitudes and hieratic symbols.

However, any continuity presupposes change, and 'change is, paradoxically, the *sine qua non* for the transfer of tradition.'<sup>6</sup> Such change is to be accommodated in different socio-cultural contexts through reinterpretation and fresh motivation, and even unconsciously adapted to radically transformed conceptual and theological paradigms.

The essay on the relationship between Sufism and Hellenic Neoplatonism is presented as an appendix, since it shows important metaphysical principles and ideas shared by Islamic mysticism and ancient Greek philosophy. This text initially constituted a paper delivered at the international conference 'Sufism as Civilizational Dialogue' (Iqbal Academy, Lahore, Pakistan, 24 November, 2006).

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NOTES

1 Simo Parpola, 'The Mesopotamian Soul of Western Culture', *Bulletin of The Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies*, 35 (2000), p. 29.

2 Jaakko Hameen-Anttila, 'Descent and Ascent in Islamic Myth', in R. M. Whiting, ed., *Melammu Symposia II: Mythology and Mythologies, Methodological Approaches to Intercultural Influences*, The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project (Helsinki, 2001), p. 47.

3 Ibid., p. 47.

4 Peter Kingsley, *Reality* (Point Reyes, CA, 2003), pp. 157-58.

5 Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence according to Shankara, Ibn al-'Arabi, and Meister Eckhart* (Bloomington, IN, 2006), p. 14.

6 Ragnhild Bjerre Finnestad, 'Temples of the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods: Ancient Traditions in New Contexts', in Byron E. Shafer, ed., *Temples of Ancient Egypt* (London, 2005), p. 203.