

# The Sufi Path of Love

By Abdullah Qutbuddin

Years ago, when I still occasionally went to a cinema, I saw a Hollywood version of a Mediaeval Islamic town. Suitably repulsive looking beggars were crouching outside a palace wall, crying: "Alms for the love of Allah!" This was a characteristic inaccuracy. In the first place the Name was mispronounced, the first syllable being accentuated instead of the second, and in the second place 'for the love of Allah' is not an Islamic phrase. 'In the name of Allah' yes, but not 'for the love of Allah'.

Also the phrase so common to Christian writers that 'God is love' is not Islamic. The quality that is equated with God in Islam is rather Truth. Indeed, in the well known story of the Sufi Al Hallaj who was crucified for proclaiming the Supreme Identity while in a state of ecstasy, his actual words were 'Ana'l Haqq', meaning "I am the Truth".

This perhaps reflects the fact that, despite the rigid dualism of exoteric Islam, Advaita is far more widely recognised by the Sufis than by any but the very greatest Christian mystics. Both religions are essentially bhakti-marga. Indeed, Indian Sufis, with their methods of ecstatic devotion and invocation of the Divine Name, are practically indistinguishable from Hindu bhaktas pining for Krishna, the Divine Lover. The very word 'Islam' means 'submission'. Many Sufi saints, however, comparable in that to Hindu bhaktas such as Tukaram or the recent Swami Ramdas, have perceived the truth of Advaita and used its language, although not developing the technique of jnana-marga.

Despite theoretical recognition of Advaita, it is the path of love that runs through Sufism, as through Christianity, and the symbolism of lover and Beloved is constantly in use. This does not imply that the quest is a sort of less real reflection of the physical reality of love. In fact, that would be an inversion of truth. There are, indeed, correspondences between different levels of reality, but it is the higher that is more real and is reflected and symbolised by the lower, not the other way round. If the Divine Ray pierces into the dark and secret place of the soul, creating there the germ of new life which grows unseen amid pain and discomfort until the 'new man' springs to life, that is a reality symbolised by, not symbolising, the physical laws of sex.

According to the symbolism used, the human lover seeking the Divine Beloved can appear either as man or woman. Indeed, the two forms of symbolism may be used indiscriminately, since both are true. In Christianity the human soul is traditionally represented, as is the Church itself, as the bride of Christ. There is also, however, the symbolism of the seeker aspiring to be guided and blessed by the Divine Grace symbolised as his Beloved — Dante by Beatrice or the troubadour by his lady who traditionally had to be unattained and unattainable. Parallel to this in Islam is the story of Majnun who goes mad with longing for the dark beauty of Laila, whose name in fact means 'night' and who symbolises the dark mystery, the Cloud of Unknowing. More frequently, however, the human soul is represented as female and as pining for the Divine Lover, just as Hindu bhaktas are gopis seeking the love of Krishna, the Divine cowherd, the flute-player. Also it will be seen that in the Maharshi's Marital Garland of Letters to Sri Arunachala symbolism which might be considered male or female is used indiscriminately. It must be remembered that this was written for the guidance and inspiration of the bhaktas among his followers.

The theme of quest for the Divine Lover is far more widely used in Islamic esoterism than in Christian and is much better attested in literature. Is this partly because few Christian saints and seekers seem to have been poets? In the great ages of Islam the poets were saints and the saints poets. Among the Persians, Hafiz is the greatest lyric poet, perhaps what Shelley or Swinburne is in English, but with the difference that, where in them only an occasional intuition makes some poem of lasting value among much verbal banality, his poems are often of substance which the West, lacking the fire of Divine Love, would consider appropriate rather to the philosopher than the poet,

In Eternity without beginning the radiancy of Thy beauty glorified in its own splendour;  
 Love was revealed and its fire set the world aflame.  
 Reason desired to kindle its lamp from that flame of Thy love,  
 The lightning of jealousy flashed, and the world was thrown into confusion.

Others staked their fortune on ease and would not take up the burden of Love;  
We, Thy lovers, were the ones whose hearts, experienced in grief, staked all on grief and took up the burden of Love.

Renunciation of the ego is the whole secret, by whatever path it may be accomplished; and who should know this better than the lover? Ansari of Herat writes:

Know that when thou learnest to lose thy self  
Thou wilt reach the Beloved.  
There is no other secret to be revealed,  
And more than this is not known to me.  
For the Sufi, love is all-sufficient, as Umar Khayyam writes:

Although the creeds number some seventy-three,  
I hold with none but that of love of Thee  
What matter faith, unfaith, obedience, sin  
Thou'rt all in all, the rest is vanity.

From love to Union, from Union to Identity. The following poem by Shabistari, prosy though it may sound in translation, is removed only by the thinnest of verbal veils from the true and ultimate doctrine of Advaita or Identity.

Union with 'The Truth' is separation for the creature state,  
Friendship with Him is estrangement from self,  
When the contingent wipes off the dust of contingency,  
Nothing remains save Necessary Being.  
The existence of the two worlds is as a dream,  
In the moment of eternity they become naught.  
Absolute Being by its own perfection is pervading all,  
Phenomenal objects are mere imaginary things;  
Imaginary things are not really existent,  
Though the numbers are many, only One is counted.  
In a moment, this world passes away,  
None remains in the world save 'The Truth',  
At that moment you attain proximity,  
You, stripped of self, are 'united' to the Beloved.<sup>1</sup>

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1 - The above quotations are taken from *The Sufi Path of Love, An Anthology of Sufism* compiled by Margaret Smith, Luzac.

The Judaic injunction to love, which Christ reiterated, had two aspects, not only to love God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength, but also to love your neighbour as yourself. On the whole, the God-intoxicated wayfarer has tended to neglect the second of these. Naturally, one who loves God will be filled with goodwill towards all His creatures, but this does not necessarily transform itself into action or constitute an active and prominent part of his suluk or path. The ecstatic is not normally a philanthropist, even though he is not an egoist. In Christianity he has often been a monk secluded from society. There is no monasticism in Islam, but the Muslim ecstatic also has seldom been actively preoccupied with human welfare.

Today there is a general tendency to stress the love of one's fellows. In Hinduism it would be called combining the path of bhakti with that of karma. A striking modern exemplar of this was the recent Hindu saint, Swami Ramdas. During the years of his training, before he became a saint, he wandered about the country with the Name of God always on his lips, but also seeing God manifested in everybody he met, not only those who helped him and were friendly but also in the ticket-collector who ejected him from a train and the bullying policeman who warned him on the icy platform. When a sadhu gave him a drinking vessel and another stole it, he cheerfully remarked that Ram in one form had given it and in another had taken it away again.<sup>2</sup>

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2 - See the two volumes of his early autobiography: In Quest of God and In the Vision of God, both published by Bhavan's Book University, Bombay.

I instance this case because of the common objection that the Muslim could not see things this way on account of the strict Islamic doctrine of the impassable gulf between the Creator and His creatures. Maybe, but the Sufi, without