HUMAN AFFAIRS, 5, 1995, 2, 184–192

THE PERFECT MAN IN ISLAMIC MYSTICISM

Xénia CELNAROVÁ
Institute of Oriental and African Studies, Slovak Academy of Sciences,
Klemensova 19, 813 64 Bratislava, Slovakia

The history of human thought witnesses permanent attempts at defining the ideal human existence. A search for the paths to reaching a higher standard of human being and cognition is also characteristic of Islamic mysticism. Theosophic works of the great Sufis emphasize self-knowledge, self-improvement and self-awareness as the starting point of the path leading to the essential oneness with God. The Perfect Man – al-Insān al-kāmil – is the one who has achieved the goal, return of the created being to the Absolute being.

One of the essential articles of Islamic dogmatism, *tawḥīd* (literally meaning "asserting oneness" or "making one", 13.; 586), is also included in the first part of the Muslim profession of faith (*shahāda*): "There is no god but God,..." The proponents of the conception of existential monism (*wudjūdīya*, also *waḥdatīya*) added to this axiom of monotheism the words: "and there is nothing but God". This means that in the teaching developed and formulated by Ibn ᶜArabī (1165–1240), the oneness of God as the highest being without any equal partner proclaimed by the dogmatists, is transposed into God's oneness as the only absolute Existence. In Sufism the concept *tawḥīd* acquired meaning of the essential oneness of all things, that means also of man, with God.

To be able to realize this oneness, man first has to know God, to approach him. But when there was absolute superiority of God on the one hand and slavish subordination of man on the other, any kind of intimate relationship was impossible. The Koran offered the believer an image of the only law-maker and highest judge punishing people even for the deeds predetermined by Himself, omnipotent, and omniscient ruler, the Lord (rabb), who had bound humans to eternal obedience and devotion by an act of primordial agreement: "When the Lord brought forth offspring from the loins of the sons of Adam, He made them witnesses against their own selves by asking them: Am I not your Lord? And they said: Indeed, we bear witness to that." (*The Quran*, Chapter 7 – 173).[1]

[1] The Koran is cited according to the translation of Muhammas Zafrulla Khan, *The Quran*. Arabic Text. English Translation. London and Dublin, Curzon Press Ltd. 1991.

Sufism tried to bridge the abyss between the so defined God and man, by a meticulously worked out theory, and extraordinarily rich poetry with the central theme of mystical love as well as by the cult of saints – mediators between man and God.[2]

The philosophy of the medieval Islamic world and theosophy developing in parallel had two springs. The first was represented by the Islamic religious tradition following the tradition of Judaism and Christianity. The Koran and the sunna (traditions related to the Prophet and the first caliphs) represented for Sufis the basic steps on their path to knowledge of God. However, they looked for the esoteric, inner (*bāṭin*) meaning behind the exoteric, external (*ẓāhir*) content of the Koran verses. Like the Shiites, exegesis appealed to Ali, to whom Muhammad allegedly confined the hidden meaning of revelation (9.; 192).

The second source was associated with the occupation of the centres of the Hellenic culture and scholarship in Syria, Mesopotamia, and Iran. With the advent of ᶜAbbāsīd dynasty in the middle of the 8th century, systematic translation of ancient philosophers into Arabic had begun and continued for almost 300 years. The penetration of the conceptions and terminology of the so-called Aristotelian *Theology* (Porphyry's commentary on *Enneads* by Plotinus), Platonic idealism and Plotinian emanation theory led to Sufism becoming more and more distant from the official theology from the 9th century onwards (9., 191).

The contact with cultures of Iran and of Indian subcontinent, countries with old and rich tradition of mysticism, was a great asset to Sufism. But speculative Sufism was most significantly influenced by Neoplatonism which became deep-rooted in Iran. One of the most important centres of Sufism was Nishapur, where Hellenic scholarship burgeoned in the past. It was a town in north-eastern Iran where several Greek philosophers led by Damaskius found shelter with the Persian King Khusraw I (about 504–579) after Emperor Justinian dissolved the Athenian Academy in 529.

The idea of Neoplatonists on recognition of the divine agent, on penetration into the essence of being through love had certainly influenced the second stage of the development of Sufism towards the end of the 8th century when warm feelings dominated fear in the relation of the mystic to God. It was also reflected in the terminology of Islamic mysticism, where the word *maḥabba* used as the expression for love in the Koran meaning rather gratitude for blessing sent by God, is in the shadow of the term *ᶜishḳ* describing the "essential Desire" for God and love of God as an essential attribute, which fills the heart of the mystic (4.; 119).

The saint from Basra Rābiᶜa al-ᶜAdawīya (born perhaps 718–801) marked the transition from simple ascetism to true mysticism aiming at spiritual communion with God, with her simple but feeling filled poetry and sayings, handed down in

[2] I put man in the first place intentionally. The role of the mediator between God and man was assigned to the prophets; I will deal with it later.

many legends. This sort of mysticism also developed in the Christian Church. At the beginning of the 14th century her poems reached Europe through Joinville, chancellor of King Louis IX and there in the milieu steeped in mysticism they produced a considerable response (11.; 162). Their central themes are the doctrine of *kashf* (the unveiling of the Beatific Vision) and the doctrine of Pure Love:

> But in that love which seeks Thee worthily
> The veil is raised that I may look on Thee. (13.; 463)

To express mystic love, Rābiᶜa and her followers used words taken from profane erotism. With deeper insight into its mysteries, Sufis more and more immersed themselves in a jumble of complex symbols and metaphors which could only be understood by the well-informed.

A butterfly attracted by a candle flame and then burned to death there became one of the most frequent metaphors in Sufi poetry. Its authorship is assigned to a martyr of mystic love al-Ḥusayn b. Mansūr al-Ḥallādj (died 922). It symbolized mystic dispersion or extinction in God (fanā). According to Anne-Marie Schimmel, al-Ḥallādj's teaching is based on the faith in absolute transcendence of God who is, through his existence in pre-eternity (*ḳidam*) isolated from everything that is created in time. Only in rare moments of ecstasy can the uncreated spirit of God be linked with the created human spirit and then the mystic becomes a personal witness of God and can declare "Anā'l-Ḥaḳḳ – I am the Truth" (in later translations "I am God!" 10.; 112).

Orientalists interpreted this utterance as al-Ḥallādj's self-worship until recently. Their interpretation was based on Arabic sources where this indeed mysterious man was introduced as pantheist, secret Christian or proponent of Vedantic aham *brahmāsmī* (11.; 173). Al-Ḥallādj's ecstatic utterance was, however, part of tradition; in the spirit of this tradition, a mystic praised a unique experience of spiritual unification with God (5.; 108). *Shaṭḥ* (ecstatic utterance) of Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (died 874): "Glory to Me! How great is My majesty!" (13.; 64) can be understood in a similar way.

The misinterpretation of al-Ḥallādj's utterance was to a considerable extent also due to a proponent of the monistic conception of the unity of the Being, the great Persian poet, Djalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (1207 –1273). In his poetic work he glorified al-Ḥallādj as the Perfect Man, which means the mystic, who achieved the highest degree of earthly being and united again with the Absolute being.

The concept "The Perfect Man" (al-Insān al-kāmil) was probably used for the first time by Muḥyi'l-Dīn Ibn (al) ᶜArabī (1165–1240). This "original thinker and synthesizer" (5.; 115) also thoroughly analysed the question of the ideal human being in the ontological, epistemological, and ethical levels within the monistic conception which had been named by his pupils *waḥdat al-wudjūd* ("unity of the being").

As in the whole philosophical work of Ibn ᶜArabī, the category of man did not deviate from the mainstream of Islamic mysticism. The conception of "the unity of the Being" and within its context also the category of the Perfect Man represents a summarization and reappraisal of the results of the five-century development of Islamic mysticism in one compact whole of high intellectual and aesthetic level.

Before Ibn ᶜArabī, Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (1058–1111) had seen in man a reduced model of the universe. Starting with Anaximenes, Greek philosophers were excited by the idea of man-microcosm encompassing all attributes of macrocosm. Through the teaching of the Neoplatonists and gnostics this idea penetrated into Sufi theosophy together with Plotinus conception of the One and his emanation into the universe. Ibn ᶜArabī also understands God as the inner side of one and the same Being, whose outer manifestation is the world. According to him, man has a special position in this relation, he is a mediator, a link between the Creator and the created world, comprising both the divine spirit and the universal matter:

"Man unites in himself both the form of God and the form of the universe. He alone manifests the divine Essence together with all its names and attributes. He is the mirror by which God is revealed to Himself, and therefore the final cause of creation. We ourselves are the attributes by which we describe God; our existence is merely an objectification of His existence. While God is necessary to us in order that we may exist, we are necessary to Him in order that He may be manifested to Himself." (13.; 170)

The Perfect Man is the one who achieved the highest stage of the cognition of God. Since man is both the form and the mirror of God, he can find the picture of the divine Beauty in himself. Knowledge of God begins with self-knowledge. The point of contact with this imperative can be sought in Greek antiquity, particularly in the famous inscription in front of the temple at Delphi and in its Socratic adaptation in terms of the knowledge of the ethical essence as a route to happiness. The Sufis find it, however, in the Koran: "We will show them Our Signs in the universe and also among their own selves, until it becomes manifest to them that the Quran is the Truth." (*The Quran*, Chapter 41 – 53). They interpreted this imperative as the command of God to look into their own hearts and find there sources of knowledge and finally also God Himself.

Self-knowledge as perceived by the Sufis implies introspection focused on the exploration of one's consciousness and by means of mystical intuition also subconsciousness until one releases from the personal "self" and finds the true "self", identical with the microcosm. The self is hidden under the alluvium of empirical knowledge. Man on the way to perfection has to get rid of the ballast as Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī puts it "like a snake which casts off its skin" (13,; 64). One's own illiteracy that has been emphasized by many great Sufis has a parallel in the "learned ignorance" (docta ignorantia) of Christian mystics.

Knowledge (*maᶜrifa*) of Islamic mystics does not represent traditionally understood empirical or speculative knowledge. It can only be reached through sanctifi-

cation. Humility, deep sense of responsibility and strict moral principles of the Sufis is in contrast to the self-satisfaction and immodest presentation of Gnostics. Tor Andrae objects therefore to the translation of the term *ᶜarīf* (one who knows) and *Ahl al-maᶜrifa* (people of knowledge) by words "Gnostic", "Gnostics" (1.; 94–5). Dhu l'-Nūn al-Misrī (about 796–859) was the first to define *maᶜrifa* as non-intellectual knowledge different from rational knowledge (*ᶜilm*). Muḥammad al-Ghazālī placed the mystic capabilities of empathy (*dhawḳ*) above rational knowledge and sensual perception. The starting point for the cognition of God is empathy with the "self" which enables elimination of the doubts on the correct choice of the way.

A means for acquiring the knowledge for Ibn ᶜArabī was "illuminative Wisdom" – *ishrāk*. He took this notion from the Iranian mystic Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (died 1191).

Suhrawardī's teaching about *ishrāk* became the basis of the name of a mystic stream *ishrāḳiyyūn* (adepts of illuminative Wisdom); its growth culminated in the 18th century in Iran where it still exists. It was based on the idea of the Primary Being as the absolute Light and the human soul as its image. The purged souls are again immersed in the world of archetype lights. Intuitive illuminative wisdom can lead the soul already in the earthly being to ontological unity of knowing and the known (7.; 158)

Theoretical foundations of the methods supporting self-improvement, self-knowledge, and self-awareness, i.e. awareness of the unity with God were laid as early as in the ninth century. Its essence was penitence, poverty, emphasis on absolute sincerity derived from constant self-examination. A minute method which critically examined the innermost depths of the soul was developed by al-Hārith al-Muḥāsibī (died 857). Ibn ᶜArabī emphasized contrition, conscientiousness, asceticism, poverty, patience, devoted love of God and pacification.

The method helping the mystic achieve or at least approach perfection was named tarika meaning literally "road", "way", "path". While God's law – *sharīᶜa* – represented a wide road for all people, *ṭarīḳa* was a path just for those who had the courage to cope with many difficulties waiting there for them. Or, as Sufis rationalized it in a verse from the Koran: "Those who believe and whose hearts find comfort in the remembrance of Allah". (*The Quran*, Chapter 13–28/29).

The Sufis' tendency to regard themselves as God's elect already occurred among the first, ascetics, commited to poverty, who identified themselves with the homeless Companions of the Prophet – *ahl al-ṣuffa* ("the people of the bench") who found shelter under the arbour (*ṣuffa* or *ẓulla*) on the yard of the mosque in Madīna (13.; 321, 579). This awareness of being specially chosen was also reflected on deriving the name *ṣūfī* from the term *ṣaff awwal* (first row of the faithful at prayer).

The Sufis also saw the origin of their name in the word *ṣafā* (purity, clarity), which was perceived as perfection of the one who had freed himself from the adherence to earthly life. Al-Ḥakīm at-Tirmidhī (dies 932) saw in the mystic a medi-

ator selected by God for his communication with ordinary human beings. Such an understanding bordered on heresy as long as it was perceived in terms of communication along the axis God – Sufi – man. The Koran introduces no mediators between God and man other than prophets; the death of Muhammad as the last prophet ended this type of communication and the official dogmatics does not recognize any other. The cult of the saints developed in Islamic mysticism under the influence of the Shiite prophetology and imamology between man and God.

It was at-Tirmidhī who laid theoretical foundations for the concept "holiness" (*wilāya*) and developed hierarchical arrangement of the saints on the basis of the grades of knowledge. At the top of hierarchy there is *al-ḳuṭb* (the Pole, the Axis). It contains *al-ḥaḳīḳa al-Muḥammadīyya* (M.'s truth). He divides the following saints into two groups: those who achieved holiness by the strict upholding of the rules and regulations of the mystic path and those who were granted holiness by God's mercy through the act of love.

Anne-Marie Schimmel differentiates between the concept of holiness in Christianity and in Sufism, where it is associated with the mystery of initiation and constant advancement on the mystic path (11.; 288).

The categorization of the saints and their characteristics culminated in ᶜAbd al-Karīm al-Djīlī's work with a typical name *Al-Insān al-kāmil fī maᶜrifat al-awākhir wa 'l-awā'il*. He depicted the idea of the Perfect Man as emanation of Absolute being from the self and return to the self. Between the ascent and descent it passes through the stages of emanation represented by names, attributes and on the last stage of emanation before merging with the essence of God, he becomes the axis or the pole of the universe which rotates around him. Every epoch must therefore have its *ḳuṭb* to preserve the world. The welfare of this world is dependent on him as on the centre of spiritual energy. He is both a divine and human being, he possesses all the attributes of God who revealed him all the secret by the initial letters of suras of the Koran. But Muhammad to whom the Koran was revealed, is higher than *ḳuṭb*.

God created Muhammad as the archetype of all human creatures. Not only *ḳuṭb* and the saints at the bottom of the hierarchy but also all prophets are subordinate to Muhammad as the most Perfect Man (*akmāl*). He is present in every epoch as the living saint and is recognizable by a mystic as *al-ḥaḳīḳa al-Muḥammadīyya* (the divine Essence in the first of these manifestations).

From the birth of Muhammad onwards, a typical manifestation of his being appears to be the light. This idea has probably its origin in the Koran verse: "They desire to extinguish the light of Allah with the breath of their mouth, but Allah will perfect His light, however much the disbelievers may dislike it." (*The Quran*, Chapter 61–8). The idea *al-nūr al-Muḥammadīyya* (the prophetic light) created by the 9th-century mystics gradually begins to dominate popular worship (13.; 452). Al-Ḥallādj expressed the idea poetically in a hymn, where he drafted the vision of the world created from Muhammad's non-extinguishing light (11.; 317).

Muhammad has an attribute of the holiness encompassed in himself from eternity equally as the attribute of prophecy. Since the Sufi has an opportunity to reach only the first of the mentioned attributes through mystic cognition, he cannot enter it like the Prophet did with his body but only with his spirit.

Muhammad's ascent through the heavenly spheres up to the God's face (*miᶜrādj – scala mystica*), indicated in the 17th and 53rd suras of the Koran, became the symbol of the ascending soul from the bonds of sensuality to the heights of mystical knowledge. The Sufis used expressions and concepts from this important passage of the Koran when depicting their own mystical experiences.

Methods for reaching a mystic experience were increasingly improved and deepened. On institutionalization of Sufism, *ṭarīḳa* becomes a collection of rigorous regulations for those who aspire to achieve perfection, in spiritual training and in everyday life. To have one's own *ṭarīḳa* became a prestigious matter of mystical brotherhoods.

Djalāl al-Dīn Rūmī's opinion was that with respect to the diversity of human characters and spiritual abilities, there are as many paths to God as people in the world looking for him. He himself has not marked any individual path, but the ethics encompassed in his grandiose work makes of the poet a real "pole" not only of the period of his life but of the whole epoch.

Rūmī's poetry, particularly his monumental *Mathnawī-yi maᶜnawī* with 25,700 verses (Rūmī himself believed that it is nothing less than an inspired exposition of the esoteric content of the Koran, 8.; 3) contains the original interpretation of Ibn ᶜArabī's monistic conception. Rūmī understood God as one universal cosmic monad (12.;827) in a similar way to Leibnitz many centuries later. The desire of all living as well as non-living elements of the universe to return to the prime essence of being was expressed in a unique way by Rūmī in the introductory verses of *Mathnawī*:

Listen to the reed how it tells a tale, complaining of separations-

Saying, "Ever since I was parted from the reed-bed, my lament hath caused man and woman to moan.

I want a bosom torn by severance, that I may unfold (to such a one) the pain of love-desire.

Every one who is left far from his source wishes back the time when he was united with it."[3]

In his commentary on the introductory part of *Mathnawī*, the translator and expert on Rūmī's work, R.A. Nicholson argued that the cited verses symbolize the lamenting of the Perfect Man separated from his original being. (8.;8)

[3] The quoted translation of R.A. Nicholson, *The Mathnawi of Jalálu'ddín Rúmi.* Edited from the *Oldest Manuscripts Available: with critical Notes, Translation, Commentary* by Reynold A. Nicholson. Volume II Containing the Translation of the First and Second Books. London 1926, p. 5.

The Perfect Man glorified by Rūmī in his *Dīwān* is a protagonist also in *Mathnawī*. The great Persian mystic analyses there the concept comprehensively; but only the reader thoroughly conversant with the mystery of Sufism is able to understand the language of symbols, metaphors, and similes and create a comprehensive picture of the Perfect Man as Rūmī imagined him on the basis of the knowledge of the ideas of his predecessors but also his own mystical experiences.

Recognition that in Rūmī's conception of the Perfect Man the active principle predominates over quietism is crucial. The poet declares that the fate of man is to struggle with fate. In the eternal circulation of life, in the reiterating ascent and descent of its forms, man as the fourth, final phase of the ascent is obliged to be above everything subordinate, to activate the germ of the Perfect Man which is encompassed in every human being.

"Si tous les hommes, si beacoup d'hommes pouvaient monter aussi haut que cet homme privilégié, ce n'est pas à l'espece humaine que la nature se fût arrêtée, car celui-là est en réalité plus qu'homme." (2., 1156)

I have intentionally selected this quotation from the essay by Henri Bergson *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (1932) to conclude my attempt at introducing the issue of the Perfect Man as it was crystallized in Sufism. Although Bergson's privileged man is a great Christian mystic, the cited words can be considered to be a precise expression of the priceless asset of all great mystics to spiritual refinement of humankind. In this sense the privileged man is undoubtedly also the Perfect Man as had been defined and represented by exceptional personalities of Islamic mysticism.

REFERENCES

1. ANDRAE, T.: *Islamische Mystiker*. Stuttgart 1960.
2. BERGSON, H.: *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*. In: BERGSON, H.: *Œuvres*. Paris 1970.
3. DŽAVELIDZE, E. D.: *U istokov tureckoj literatury* (By the springs of Turkish literature) I. Djelaľ-ed-din Rumi. Tbilisi 1979.
4. *The encyclopaedia of Islam*. Vol. IV, Leiden 1978. Entries ᶜISHḲ, ISHRĀḲ, ISHRĀḲIYYŪN.
5. *The encyclopedia of Religion*. Vol. 14, New York 1987. Entry Sufism.
6. KNYŠ, A.D.: *Učenie Ibn ᶜArabi v pozdnej musuľmanskoj tradicii* (Teaching of Ibn ᶜArabi in late Moslim culture). In: *Sufizm v kontexte musuľmanskoj kuľtury* (Sufism in the context of Muslim culture). Moscow 1989.
7. KROPÁČEK, L.: *Duchovní cesty islámu* (Spiritual paths of Islam). Praha 1993.
8. *The Mathnawí of Jalálu'ddín Rúmí*. Edited from the *Oldest Manuscripts Available: with Critical Notes, Translation, and Commentary* by Reynold A. Nicholson. Vol. VII, London 1937.
9. RYPKA, J.: *Dějiny novoperské literatury až do začátku XX. sťoletí* (History of New Persian literature till the beginning of the 20th century). In: *Dějiny perské a tádžické literatury* (History of Persian and Tajik literature). Prague 1963.

10. SCHIMMEL, A.: *Mystische Dimensionen des Islam. Die Geschichte des Sufismus.* München 1992.
11. SCHIMMEL, A.: *Sufismus und Volksfrömmigkeit.* In: ANNEMARIE SCHIMMEL u. a., *Der Islam III.*, Stuttgart–Berlin–Köln 1990.
12. SHARIF, M. M.: *A History of Muslim Philosophy.* Vol. II, Wiesbaden 1963.
13. *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam.* Leiden, E.J. Brill 1953. Entries AL-BISṬĀMĪ, AL-INSĀN AL-KĀMIL, MIʿRĀDJ, NŪR MUḤAMMADĪ, RĀBIʿA AL-ʿADAWĪYA, ṬARĪḲA, TAṢAWWUF, TAWḤĪD.
14. STEPANJANC, M.T.: *Filosofskije aspekty sufizma* (Philosophical aspects of Sufism). Moscow 1987.