

The image shows the interior of a mosque, likely the Great Mosque of Cordoba. A large, ornate archway frames a view of a courtyard and a minaret in the distance. The architecture features intricate geometric patterns and golden accents. The lighting is warm, suggesting an evening or sunset setting. The text is overlaid on the image in a bold, white, serif font.

***CLAUD
FIELD***

***MYSTICS
AND
SAINTS
OF ISLAM***

Claud Field

Mystics and Saints of Islam

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



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PREFACE

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It is a custom in some quarters to represent Mohammanadan mysticism as merely a late importation into Islam, and an altogether alien element in it. But however much later Islamic mysticism may have derived from Christian, Neo-platonic, and Buddhist sources, there is little doubt that the roots of mysticism are to be found in the Koran itself. The following verse is an instance: "God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. His light is like a niche in which is a lamp, the lamp encased in glass—the glass as it were a glistening star. From a blessed tree is it lighted, the olive neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil would well nigh shine out even though fire touched it not! It is light upon light!" (*Koran Sura 24*).

Indeed it seems strange to accord the title of "a practical mystic" to Cromwell and to deny it to Mohammad, whose proclivity for religious meditation was so strong that the Arabs used to say "Muhammad is in love with his Maker,"¹ and whose sense of the "terror of the Lord" was so intense that it turned his hair prematurely white. Many of the reported sayings of the Early Companions of Muhammad show that they shared this terror. "Verily, you shall see hell, you shall see it with the eye of certainty" says the Koran, and they thought it very probable. Thus Ali exclaimed "Alas for the shortness of the provision and the terrors of the way!" Abu'l Darda said "If ye knew what ye shall see after death, ye would not eat nor drink, and I wish that I were a tree that is lopped and then devoured."²

This "fear of the Lord" led naturally to an almost fierce asceticism. Abu Bekr and Ali both founded communities of ascetics,³ and during the first and second centuries of Islam there were many orthodox mystics. Professor Nicholson in the work just quoted, rightly says "I do not think that we need look beyond Islam for the origin of the Sufi doctrines.... The early Sufis are still on orthodox ground, their relation to Islam is not unlike that of the mediæval Spanish mystics to the Roman Catholic Church."

The following sketches are for the most part translations of papers by continental scholars such as Alfred Von Kremer, Pavet de Courteille, and A.F. Mehren. The essays on Ghazzali and Jalaluddin Rumi are, however, founded on original study of those writers. The translator hopes a wholesome tonic may be found in some of these Moslem mystics at a time when many "Christian" pulpits and presses seem anxious to dilute Christianity "into a presumptuous and effeminate love which never knew fear."⁴

He desires to thank the Editors of the *Expository Times*, *Church Missionary Review*, *Irish Church Quarterly*, and *London Quarterly Review* for permission to include papers which have appeared in those journals.

C.F.

¹ Ghazzali, Munqidh.

² Nicholson. Literary History of the Arabs (p. 225).

³ Tholuck. Sufismus.

⁴ Sir John Seeley.

CHAPTER I

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PANTHEISTIC SUFISM5

I.—THE IMPORT OF ISLAMIC MYSTICISM

The moral law proclaimed by Moses three thousand years ago agrees with that which governs men to-day, irrespective of their various stages of culture; the moral precepts of a Buddha and Confucius agree with those of the Gospel, and the sins for which, according to the Book of the Dead of the ancient Egyptians, men will answer to the judges of the other world are sins still after four thousand years. If the nature of the unknown First Cause is ever to be grasped at all, it can only be in the light of those unchanging moral principles which every man carries in his own breast. The idea of God is therefore not an affair of the understanding, but of the feeling and conscience. Mysticism has always so taken it, and has therefore always had a strong attraction for the excitable and emotional portion of mankind whom it has comforted in trial and affliction. Every religion is accordingly rather intended for the emotions than for the understanding, and therefore they all contain mystical tendencies. The mysticism of Islam and Christendom have many points of contact, and by mysticism perhaps will be first bridged the wide gulf which separates Islam from Christendom, and thereby from modern civilisation. Just in proportion as the various religions express the ideals of goodness and truth they approximate to one another as

manifestations of the unchanging moral principle. Inasmuch as they surmised this, the Motazilites (or free-thinkers in Islam), at a time when Europe lay in the profoundest intellectual and moral bewilderment, fought for one of those ideas which, although they are quickly submerged again in the stormy current of the times, continue to work in silence and finally emerge victorious. On that day when the Moslem no longer beholds in God simply omnipotence, but also righteousness, he will simultaneously re-enter the circle of the great civilised nations among whom he once before, though only for a short time, had won the first place.

It is not perhaps too fanciful to hail, as an omen of the triumph of moral mysticism over the dogmatic rigidity of Islam, the fact that the present Sultan Muhammad V. was girded with the sword of Osman by the head of the Mevlevi dervishes, a sect founded by the great mystic teacher Jalaluddin Rumi of Iconium. Forty-three years ago a Persian Orientalist Mirza Kasim Beg wrote in the *Journal Asiatique*:—

"L'unique voie qui dans l'Islam puisse conduire à la réforme c'est la doctrine du mysticisme."

II.—EARLIER PHASES

The period during which the asceticism practised by the earlier Sufis passed into the dreamy pantheism which characterises the later Sufism is the end of the third century after Muhammad. This introduced a new element into Islam which for centuries exercised a powerful influence on national culture, and is still partially operative at present. The conception of God and of the relation of the finite and

human with the infinite and divine from this time onward formed the chief subject of inquiry and meditation.

The man who was destined to be the first to give those ideas, which had hitherto been foreign to Arabian Sufism, definite expression was a poor workman, a cotton-carder, bearing the name of Hellaj. He was an Arabised Persian, born in Persia, but educated in Irak, where he enjoyed the privilege of being instructed by Junaid. The story of his life as handed down by Shiah or Sunni writers has been much exaggerated. It is clear, however, that he had a great number of disciples who revered him as their spiritual guide and ascribed to him almost supernatural powers. His ever-growing popularity much scandalised the orthodox mullahs, who moved the authorities to proceed against him, and were successful in procuring his execution 922 A.D. Before his death he was subjected to terrible tortures, which he bore with wonderful composure.

The reason of his condemnation was declared to be that he regarded himself as an incarnation of the Godhead. His disciples honoured him as a saint after his death. They ascribed to him the famous saying, "I am the Truth" (*i.e.* God), which they took in a pantheistic sense. He is said to have taught the doctrine of the incarnation of the Godhead in a man and to have uttered the exclamation:

Praise to the Most High Who has revealed His humanity and concealed the overpowering splendour of His Deity. Whoso purifies himself by abstinence and purges himself from every trace of fleshiness, unto him the Spirit of God enters, as it entered into Jesus. When he has attained to this

degree of perfection, whatever he wills, happens, and whatever he does is done by God.

His letters to his disciples are said to have commenced with the formula, "From the Lord of Lords to His slaves." His disciples wrote to him:

O Spirit of the Spirit! O highest Aim of the holy: We bear witness that Thou hast incarnated Thyself in the form of Hosain the cotton-carder (Hellaj). We flee for protection to Thee and hope in Thy mercy, O Knower of secrets.

The genuineness of these fragments has much to support it, but is not entirely beyond doubt. This much, however, is clear, that the disciples of Hellaj after his death regarded him as a divine being. Ibn Hazm, a trustworthy author who wrote only 150 years after the execution of Hellaj, says so expressly. Ghazzali, who wrote about fifty years later still, does not mention this, but shelters Hellaj from the charge of blasphemy by construing his exclamation "I am the Truth" in a pantheistic sense, and excuses it by ascribing it to an excess of love to God and to mystic ecstasy. In another place he says:

The first veil between God and His servant is His servant's soul. But the hidden depth of the human heart is divine and illuminated by light from above; for in it is mirrored the eternal Truth completely, so that it encloses the universe in itself. Now when a man turns his gaze on his own divinely illumined heart he is dazzled by the blaze of its beauty, and the expression "I am God!" easily escapes him. If from falls into error and is ruined. It is as though he had

allowed himself to be misled by a little spark from the light-ocean of Godhead instead of pressing forward to get more light. The ground of this self-deception is that he in whom the Super-*natural is mirrored confuses himself with it. So the colour of a picture seen in a mirror is sometimes confounded with the mirror itself.

Hellaj was no more than the representative of an old idea, Indian in origin, which he combined with Sufism, thereby giving an entirely new direction to Islamic thought, which was important, as leading to an entirely new development of the conception of God. Even previous to Hellaj, the doctrine of incarnation had emerged in Islam. The Caliph Ali was reported to have been such, and was accordingly venerated by the Shiahs. The sect of the Khattabiyah worshipped the Imam Jafar Sadik as God. Another sect believed that the Divine Spirit had descended upon Abdallah Ibn Amr.

In Khorassan the opinion was widely spread that Abu Muslim, the great general who overturned the dynasty of the Ommeyyads and set up that of the Abbasides, was an incarnation of the spirit of God. In the same province under Al Mansur, the second Abbaside Caliph, a religious leader named Ostasys professes to be an emanation of the Godhead. He collected thousands of followers, and the movement was not suppressed without much fighting. Under the Caliph Mahdi a self-styled Avatar named Ata arose, who on account of a golden mask which he continually wore was called *Mokanna*, or "the veiled prophet." He also had a numerous following, and held the Caliph's armies in check for several years, till in 779 A.D.,

being closely invested in his castle, he, with his whole harem and servants, put an end to themselves.

Towards the end of the second century after Muhammad, Babek in Persia taught the transmigration of souls and communism. His followers, named Khoramiyyah, long successfully resisted the Caliph's troops. He claimed that the soul of an ancient law-giver named "Bod" had passed into him, which meant perhaps that he wished to pass for a "Buddha."

It is well known that Shiite teachers were especially active in Persia. In the apotheosis of Ali, as well as in the cases of Abu Muslim, we find an assertion of the ideas peculiar to the Persians in pre-Islamic times. The infusion or indwelling of the Godhead in man as with the Hindu Avatars was also popular, and widely spread in Persia. In Bagdad, from the time of the early Abbasides, the Persians had exercised great influence. Shiahs were able to profess their views freely under the tolerant or rather religiously indifferent Caliph Mamoun. Bagdad early harboured within its walls a number of communities imbued with Shiah doctrine, and the Persian conception of God silently, but widely prevailed.

Hellaj, educated in the orthodox Sunni school of Junaid, which, through its laying stress on the idea of love to God, possessed rather a mystic than dogmatic character, allowed himself to be carried away by his passionate temperament into not only preaching, but practically applying to himself the above-mentioned doctrines, which though known to many, had been discreetly veiled in reserve. When once the populace have been prepared for a new idea, the mere

expression of it is sufficient to act as a spark on tinder. The fatal word was spoken by Hellaj; the authorities did their duty, seized the daring innovator and put him to death in the cruel fashion of the time. But the word once spoken had been borne on the winds in all directions, and the execution of Hellaj gave a powerful impulse to the spread of his doctrine. There are periods in the lives of some nations when the longing for a martyr's crown becomes epidemic. A few years after the execution of Hellaj, a man of the people, Ibn Aby Azkyr, from the same village, Shalmaghan, where Hellaj had spent his youth, gave himself out as an incarnation of the Godhead. He was put to death with several of his followers under the reign of the Caliph Radhi, 933 A.D. A century after Hellaj an Egyptian, Ismail Darazy, from whom the Druses derive their name, proclaimed the Fatimite Caliph Hakim to be an incarnation.

How great was the influence exercised in general by those ideas for which Hellaj died a martyr's death we learn most clearly from the pages of Ghazzali, who wrote not quite two hundred years later. He says:

The speculations of the Sufis may be divided into two classes: to the first category belong all the phrases about love to God and union with Him, which according to them compensate for all outward works. Many of them allege that they have attained to complete oneness with God; that for them the veil has been lifted; that they have not only seen the Most High with their eyes, but have spoken with Him, and go so far as to say "The Most High spoke thus and thus." They wish to imitate Hellaj, who was crucified for using such expressions, and justify themselves by quoting

his saying, "I am the Truth." They also refer to Abu Yazid Bistamy, who is reported to have exclaimed, "Praise be to me!," instead of "Praise be to God!" This kind of speculation is extremely dangerous for the common people, and it is notorious that a number of craftsmen have left their occupation to make similar assertions. Such speeches are highly popular, as they hold out to men the prospect of laying aside active work with the idea of purging the soul through mystical ecstasies and transports. The common people are not slow to claim similar rights for themselves and to catch up wild and whirling expressions. As regards the second class of Sufi speculation, it consists in the use of unintelligible phrases which by their outward apparent meaning and boldness attract attention, but which on closer inspection prove to be devoid of any real sense.

These words of the greatest thinker among the Muhammadans at that time afford us a deep insight into the remarkable character of the period. From them we gather with certainty that the division of Sufism into two classes, one orthodox and outwardly conforming to Islam, and the other free-thinking and pantheistic, was already an accomplished fact before Ghazzali's time. We recognise also that the latter kind of Sufism was very popular among the lowest classes of the people and even among the agricultural population. The fundamental characteristic of mysticism, the striving after the knowledge of God by way of ecstatic intuition, had already come into open conflict with the fundamental principles of Islam. "Mystical love to God" was the catchword which brought people to plunge into ecstatic reverie, and by complete immersion in

contemplation to lose their personality, and by this self-annihilation to be absorbed in God. The simple ascetic character of the ancient Arabian Sufism was continually counteracted by the element of passive contemplation which was entirely foreign to the Arab mind. The terms "ascetic" and "Sufi," which were formerly almost synonymous, henceforward cease to be so, and often conceal a fundamental variance with each other. We shall not go very far wrong if we connect the crisis of this intellectual development with the appearance of Hellaj, so that the close of the third and commencement of the fourth century after Muhammad marks the point of time when this philosophico-religious schism was completed. In Persia the theosophy of Hellaj and his supporters found a receptive soil and flourished vigorously; on that soil were reared the finest flowers of Persian poetry. From the Persians this tendency passed over to the Turks, and the poetry of both nations contains strongly-marked theosophical elements.

III.—THE LOVE OF GOD AND ECSTASY

Already in the second century of Islam great stress was laid upon the cultivation of love to God, an outstanding example of which is the female Sufi Rabia. With it was connected a gradually elaborated doctrine of ecstatic states and visions which were believed to lead by the way of intuition and divine illumination to the spiritual contemplation of God. We have already endeavoured to describe the religious enthusiasm which took possession of the Moslems in the first and second century after

Muhammad and have partly traced the causes which led to this phenomenon.

Ecstasy is an invariable concomitant of religious enthusiasm. In the endeavour to break through the narrow bounds which confine the human spirit pious and credulous natures are only too easily led astray. The instruments which man has at his command when he wishes to investigate the supernatural do not suffice to procure him an even approximately correct image of the object which he would fain observe. While the optician with the aid of mathematics can reduce errors arising from the convexity of his magnifying lens to an infinitesimally small amount, the theologian has never found a device, and never will find one, to obviate the errors which arise from the fact that his intellectual insight has to be exercised through the medium of material senses, which obscure the clearness of his observation. And yet it is precisely this ceaseless striving, this irresistible impulse after something higher, this unquenchable thirst for the fountain-head of knowledge, which constitutes the highest and noblest side of humanity, and is the most indubitable pledge of its spiritual future. The net result of these strivings has been an endless series of self-delusions, and yet humanity takes on a grander aspect in them than in all its other manifold efforts and successes. The history of this spiritual wrestling, this hopeless and yet never relaxed struggle against the impossible, forms the noblest aspect of the history of mankind.

The phenomena produced by Islam in this respect do not fundamentally differ from those produced by Christianity and Buddhism. Sufism exhibits a more remarkable

development of these phenomena, simply because it grew up in an environment which favoured their more luxuriant growth.

The Koran, which Muhammad came, as he said to preach, was regarded as the very word of God, and must therefore have produced an overpowering impression on the minds of the faithful. Of this numerous instances are reported. Abd al Wahid ibn Zaid heard one day a Koran-reader recite the following verse (Sura 45: 28):—"This is Our book, which announces to you the truth; for We have caused to be recorded all that ye have done. Those who believe and do good works shall their Lord admit to His favour; verily this is the most manifest recompense." On hearing this Abd al Wahid broke into loud weeping and fainted. Miswar ibn Machramah was not even able to hear any verse of the Koran read, being so powerfully affected thereby as to become senseless. Of Jobair ibn Motim it is reported that he said: "I heard the Prophet recite the following verses of the Koran:—

1. I swear by Tur.
2. By a book which stands written on outspread parchment.
3. By the house to which pilgrimage is made.
4. By the lofty dome of heaven.
5. And by the swelling ocean.
6. That the judgment of thy Lord is at hand.

Then it appeared to me," said Jobair, "as if my heart would burst in twain." The pious Cadi Ijad adduces as a special proof of the inspiration of the Koran the deep impression of fear and terror which its recital produced on the minds of the hearers.

Muhammad ibn Mansur relates that once passing a house at midnight he heard the voice of a man praying to God loudly and fervently, lamenting his sins with deep contrition. Muhammad ibn Mansur could not resist the temptation; he put his mouth to the keyhole and uttered the verse which threatens the unbelievers with hell-fire. He heard a heavy fall within the house, and all was still. As he went down the same street the next morning he saw a corpse being carried out of the same house, followed by an old woman. He inquired of her whose body it was, and she answered: "Last night my son heard a verse of the Koran recited, and it broke his heart." We are far from believing all these stories, but they show what a view was held in the earliest times regarding the effect produced by the Koran on the minds of those who heard it.

The ecstatic bent of mind of the ascetics of Islam and the later Sufis arose from these beginnings. Then, as now, self-originated phases of feeling were attributed to outer causes; from the remotest times men have sought without them the Divinity which they carried within.

The wider spread and greater permanence of ecstatic phenomena among the Moslems than elsewhere was due to the concurrence of various conditions, chief among which was the peculiar temperament of the Arab. Capable of the fiercest momentary excitement, he quickly subsided into a state of complete apathy which is pain-proof. I have a lively recollection of the cases mentioned by my late friend Dr. Bilharz, who spoke of the astonishing anæsthesia which the patients in the medical school of Kasr al 'ain in Cairo, where he was professor, exhibited under the most painful

operations. They uttered hardly a sound when operated upon in the most sensitive nerve-centres. The negro, notoriously excitable as he is, and therefore still more exposed to complete prostration of the organs of feeling, exhibits this apathy in a yet more marked degree than the Arab and Egyptian. Many examples of this are found in old Arabic authors—*e.g.*, in the narratives of the martyrdoms of Hatyt, of Hellaj and of a young Mameluke crucified in 1247 A.D. Of the last Suyuti has preserved a psychologically detailed description.

Although Christian martyrology is rich in such instances of unshakable fortitude under the most painful tortures, yet in Islam the ecstatic temper has attained a higher significance and been more constantly exhibited. A chief reason of this was the religious fanaticism, which was incomparably stronger and more widely diffused in Islam than in mediæval Christendom. The minds of the Moslems were kept in perpetual tension by severe religious exercises, the effect of which was intensified by fasts and pilgrimages. The peculiar manner of life in the desert, the birthplace of Islam, also contributed to this; the scanty diet, the loneliness of the desert, and in the towns the want of civic life, the poverty of ideas among the Arabs, all helped to produce the same result. Finally, deception, hypocrisy, and superstition, as, alas, so often is the case in religious matters, played a great part. Whoever did not feel ecstatically moved at the recitation of the Koran pretended to be so, and often thereby, perhaps unconsciously, exercised a great effect on others. Men began by pretending to feel religious enthusiasm and ended by believing that

they really felt it. Ghazzali mentions in the *Ihya ul-ulum* that the prophet commanded that whoever did not feel moved to tears at the recitation of the Koran should pretend to weep and to be deeply moved; for, adds Ghazzali sagely, in these matters one begins by forcing oneself to do what afterwards comes spontaneously. Moreover, the fact that religious excitement was looked upon as the mark of a fervent mind and devout intensity, vastly increased the number of those who claimed mystic illumination.

When verses of the Koran through frequent repetition lost their power to awaken ecstasy, single lines or fragments of poems sufficed to produce it. Once the mystic Taury found himself in the midst of a company who were discussing some scientific question. All took part in it with the exception of Taury, who suddenly rose and recited:—

Many cooing doves mourn in the mid-day heat, Sadly
under the roof of foliage overhead, Remembering old
companions and days gone by; Their lament awakens
my sorrow also, My mourning rouses them, and often
theirs disturbs my sleep; I do not understand their
cooing, and they do not understand my weeping: But
through, my sorrow of heart I know them, and through
their heart-sorrow they know me.

Hardly had those present heard these verses than they all fell into a state of ecstatic contemplation.

Ibrahim ben Adham, the celebrated Sufi, once heard the following verses:—

Everything is forgiven thee, except estrangement from Us: We pardon thee all the past, and only that remains which has escaped Our eyes (*i.e.*, nothing).

They immediately caused him to fall into a trance which lasted twenty-four hours. Ghazzali, who himself borrowed much from the Sufis, and was a diligent student of their doctrine, seeks to explain these strange phenomena on psychological grounds. He divides the ecstatic conditions which the hearing of poetical recitations produces into four classes. The first, which is the lowest, is that of the simple sensuous delight in melody. The second class is that of pleasure in the melody and of understanding the words in their apparent sense. The third class consists of those who apply the meaning of the words to the relations between man and God. To this class belongs the would-be initiate into Sufism; he has necessarily a goal marked out for him to aim at, and this goal is the knowledge of God, meeting Him and union with Him by the way of secret contemplation, and the removal of the veil which conceals Him. In order to compass this aim the Sufi has a special path to follow; he must perform various ascetic practices and overcome certain spiritual obstacles in doing so. Now when, during the recitation of poetry, the Sufi hears mention made of blame or praise, of acceptance or refusal, of union with the Beloved or separation from Him, of lament over a departed joy or longing for a look, as often occurs in Arabic poetry, one or the other of these accords with his spiritual state and acts upon him, like a spark on tinder, to set his heart aflame. Longing and love overpower him and unfold to him manifold vistas of spiritual experience.

The fourth and highest class is that of the fully initiated who have passed through the stages above-mentioned, and whose minds are closed to everything except God. Such an one is wholly denuded of self, so that he no longer knows his own experiences and practices, and, as though with senses sealed, sinks into the ocean of the contemplation of God. This condition the Sufis characterise as self-annihilation (Fana).

But he who is bereft of self-consciousness is none the less aware of what is without him; it is as if his consciousness were withdrawn from everything but the one object of contemplation, *i.e.*, God. While he who is completely absorbed in the contemplation of the object seen is as little capable of theorising regarding the act of contemplation as regarding the eye, the instrument of sight, or the heart, the seat of joyful emotion. Just in the same way a drunken man is not conscious of his intoxication, so he who is drowned in joy knows nothing of joy itself, but only knows what causes it. Such a condition of mind may occur with regard to created things as well as with regard to the Creator Himself, only in the latter case it is like a flash of lightning, without permanence. Could such a condition of the soul last longer, it would be beyond the power of human nature to endure and would end in overwhelming it. So it is related of Taury that once in a meeting he heard this verse recited:—

In my love to Thee I attained to a height where to tread
causes the senses to reel.