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A READER'S TREASURY

Visits to Sufi Centers

by

Ansari, Tiryaqi, Ellis, Jamil, and Schneck

Some Recent Research Papers on Sufis and
Sufism

Spiritual Science

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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2000



I first read this tiny book of five essays in the middle of 1985 at a time when I was actively studying Sufism in the works of Idries Shah and Hazrat Inayat Khan. In the first essay, Ansari tells us that to counter their opposition, the Sufis developed the "Path of Reproach" — here's how it works:

[page 3] Someone vilifies a Sufi. He answers: "Everything that you say against me is true, and it does not even go far enough. In fact, in the nature of things, you can only have an incomplete idea of how bad I am. I am the one who knows all the secret failings and shortcomings in me, and it is I therefore who am an expert on my iniquity. "

Once as he was visiting a Sufi group in Mecca, Ansari told them that some people did not like Idries Shah's works. The Sheikh in charge of the meeting told him:

[page 3] That is a little too late — rather like a wave saying "I don't like Noah's Ark." The Ark is built, it works, it is designed to defy the waves. It succeeds. What the "wave" says may be interesting; it may be expected. But significant? No.

One of Ansari's quests on his trips through Sufi countries was to find the real Sufis versus the ones who were imitators and imposters. One genuine Sufi gave him six simple things to look for in a real Sufi (page 6). "Look at whether the 'master':

- **Can explain what he is doing by reference to the Classics.**
- **Refuses to follow a single classical teacher alone.**
- **Can operate outside of the ritualistic, without 'gadgets'.**
- **Refuses to mystify you, and has no magical aura.**
- **Produces no atmosphere of 'power' around him. As the ancients have rightly said: 'The fraud makes people believe that he is a man of power. The true Sufi spend much time appearing very normal.'**
- **Can work 'in the world' and make what seem like worldly activities successful, as Khaja Ahrar did. He was a self-made millionaire, but none could say that he was not the supreme adept of the age.**

So, many people come to the East to meet a Sufi that matches their expectation of what a holy man should be and they are invariably disappointed. Sometimes the disillusionment takes years, as it did for Reshad Feild, the British vegetarian, who was upset by his Sufi master's eating of meat. Finally Reshad was unable to contain himself and asked his master why he ate meat. His master's response was, "I eat meat because I like to eat meat." That is an example of how one's expectations are deflated by a real Sufi — if you try to

take a bite of the peacock's display: you'll only get a mouthful of feathers.

The real substance of a Sufi is not in external display intended to impress the public, but in the ability to take the stance of a learner in a subject and to draw the teaching lessons from the student thereby. When I first encountered this process back in 1977 I wrote this phrase to describe it: "Thus A Teacher, So Also A Learner". It is a sentence fragment, has no verb whatsoever, and yet it demonstrates a deep truth about teaching and learning the way a Sufi does it. Andrew C. C. Ellis says it this way:

[page 20] Sufi teachers act as if they were themselves uninformed observers. In other words, they have distanced themselves from the material, and are presenting it almost (but not quite) through the eyes of the student. It thus can have a powerful teaching effect, just as when a good teacher in any more profane subject adopts the stance of the learner, but brings to the selection, impact and projection of his materials the expertise which his knowledge makes possible.

Gustav Schneck tells us of the four stages that must be gone through in the Naqshbandi path (Page 34):

- 1) desiring things for oneself
- 2) desiring things for others
- 3) desiring what should be desired
- 4) being free from desire

In these days we can look around and see a lot of Stage Two masquerading as human goodness. Is it that Stage Two gives them a lot of pleasure? Schneck says, it "is only a form of Stage One." Also there are many who mistake the nature of being free from desire and end up locked in a "non-desire" state. Schneck closes out the book with these words:

[page 35] Certain spiritual systems, possessed of a tradition as to the overweening importance of this stage [Stage Four] but evidently lacking the means to monitor and assist progress towards it, are characterised by striving to enter and stay in a 'non-desire' state. The result is a large number of people in a quietist condition. They have not reached the stage of ability to detach, but the state of the inability to do anything else, which is, rather than spiritual, possible to describe as a conditioning in apathy.

THIS CONDITION COMES ABOUT BECAUSE THE PREVIOUS STAGES HAVE NOT BEEN SUCCESSFULLY PASSED THROUGH.

