


AL-TARIQAH

THE SPIRITUAL PATH OF ISLAM


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The *Tariqah*, or "the Way" to the inner dimension of Islam, is inextricably connected with the *Shari'ah* (Divine Law). If we take the circumference of a circle to symbolize the *Shari'ah*, the radii which connect the points on the circumference to the center symbolize the *Tariqah*; the center would be the *Haqiqah* or Truth. Both the Way and the Divine Law, the radii and the circumference are determined by the Center, by the Truth which lies at the heart of all things. Consequently, by virtue of his acceptance of the *Shari'ah* each Muslim is as a point on the circumference. Only from here he can begin to tread the "Way" towards the Center.

It is not possible to participate in the life of the *Tariqah*, which is known as Sufism, except by accepting the *Shari'ah* fully and living according to its tenets. The *Tariqah* does not evade the *Shari'ah*, but on the contrary penetrates into its inner meaning and spirit. This holds true both for the Sunni and Shi'ah methods.

Many of the leading Sunni jurists and theologians like Imam Shāfi'i, al-Ghazzālī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī have characterized Sufism as the heart and spirit of the *Shari'ah*. Also, as another source, especially in Shiism, many of the sayings of the Imāms form the very basis of the spiritual path.



The *Tariqah* is based most of all on emulating the life and traditions of the prophet of Islam. Indeed, no group of men in Islamic society has been as insistent on basing their lives upon the model of the Prophet as the Sufis. The nocturnal ascent or *mi'rāj* of the Prophet, during which he was taken from Mecca to Jerusalem and there ascended all the scales of universal existence to the Divine Presence, is the prototype of all spiritual experience. The Sufi seeks to gain in life an experience resembling, albeit on a smaller scale, the ascension of the Prophet.



The *Tariqah* has usually been defined as the attainment of *ihsān* or "spiritual virtue". This the Prophet defined as: "To adore Allah as though thou didst see Him; and if thou dost not see Him, He nonetheless sees thee." It is this definition as applied to Islām (surrender to God) and *imām* (faith in Unity) that is the very basis of the *Tariqah* of Sufism. Applied to Islam it becomes extinction in God, and applied to *imām* it becomes *gnosis* (*'irfān*) - that knowledge which illuminates man and transforms him.

The *Tariqah* in Islam, as in every other genuine "spiritual Way", consists of a doctrine and method — or more explicitly, a doctrine, a set of spiritual virtues and a "spiritual alchemy." In its essence, the doctrine aims to realize that only God is the absolutely Real and that everything else is only relatively real. It is to realize that there are a multiplicity of worlds above the material one, and that the phenomena of this material world are symbols of higher orders of reality. This leads to the famous doctrine of the "unity of being" (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) which has often been misconstrued as pantheism. Actually, according to it, although God is absolutely transcendent, in some mysterious way all things are plunged in God and nothing is outside His Unity.



The method of Sufism is based on the fundamental conception of man in Islām as a "theomorphic" being who share in God's Qualities. Since God has Life, Will and Speech, man is endowed with the same, and it is particularly through Speech that he is able to return to God. God's Word created the world and reveals the Truth, while in man the Word transmits the Truth and transforms man himself. All human speech should, therefore, in essence be either a discourse on truth or prayer. The Qurān, as the Word of God, is the sacrament of Islām and it is through the Word that man is saved. According to a sacred *ḥadīth*, God addresses man in these terms: "He who mentions Me in himself, I will mention him in Myself; and he who mentions Me in an assembly, him I will mention in an assembly greater than his." Here then lies the fundamental method of the *Tariqah*: wakening man from the dream of forgetfulness through the continuous remembering and mentioning (*dhikr*) of God.

The virtues in the *Tariqah* are "manners of being", ways in which human existence itself can come to share in the Truth — which on the mental plane appears as doctrine. The virtues are not sentimental attitudes but have profound roots in our existence. They are a means of participating in the Divine equilibrium. The main virtues are humility, charity and truthfulness — or fear, love and knowledge — to which the virtues of perseverance and patience are grafted.

As for the spiritual alchemy, it is a means of grace (*barakah*) which alone can transmute the human soul. This *barakah* is found in the Sufi orders, which became distinct entities at the same time as the schools of law in the ninth century (third century A.H.). Only through initiation into an extant and live Sufi order can one hope to gain that *barakah* which makes the transformation of the soul from chaos to order possible. And it is always only with Divine aid (*tawfīq*) that the path can be tread.

The *Tariqah*, then, is the inner dimension of Islam which seeks to purify the soul and give an inner spirit to the body of the *Shari'ah*. It is completely based on the *Shari'ah* and could not be practiced outside of the Divine Law. The *Tariqah* is the way of producing sanctity and that spiritual perfume which results from vision of the Divine and participation in the Divine Life.

