



SUFISM AND THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE PRESENT ERA

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July 2016



THE REQUIREMENTS AND perspectives of what is desirable and non-desirable of each era are different. In some eras, the occurrence of miracles and supernatural events are appreciated greatly, whilst in others preference is given to devotion and dedication in worship as well as serving humanity. In other eras, aspects relating to what is natural and realistic are more desirable. In the present era of advancement and scientific as well as material development, the desire to gain benefit and the pursuit of intellectual and logical reasoning is prevalent and dominant. In relation to Sufism (*tasawwuf*), the focal point today revolves around the question: how can humanity benefit from Sufism in this world? How can Sufism contribute to the wellbeing and prosperity of people at large and provide peace and security? This is because belief in the hereafter and life after death is not something that is held by everyone in the whole world. Therefore, as well as the benefits of Sufism in relation to spiritual enlightenment and regarding matters of the hereafter, the need of the day is to highlight the material and tangible benefits of Sufism to today's world.

THE PRESENT ERA

The majority of the *Sufiya'* (spiritual Sufi leaders) of today remain encircled by a mass of their devoted followers, and they do not have the

opportunity to consider and reflect on the contemporary issues of present times and matters affecting the Muslim *Ummah* (community). They are requested to reflect on the following tradition of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, reported by Abu Dharr [ra], in which the noble Prophet ﷺ stated: "It is necessary for the person of intellect to be fully aware of the circumstances and state of affairs of his time, to consider his position and to guard his tongue."¹ On this topic Allama Ibn Abidin al-Shami has quoted a narration which is also worth taking into consideration: "A scholar who is not aware of the customs and traditions, trends and rules, of his era is actually ignorant."²

COMMAND TO ADOPT WISDOM

To address the audience according to the requirements of each era and in accordance with their level of intellect is true wisdom, and this is the wisdom that is commanded by the Qur'an and the *Hadith* (prophetic tradition). Allah ﷻ says: "Invite (O beloved Prophet!) to the way of your Lord with wisdom and excellent advice, and debate with them in a manner that is the best." [*Qur'an* 16:125].

Whilst explaining the term 'wisdom' mentioned in

¹ *Sahih Ibn Habban*, vol. 1, p. 207, *Hadith* 363.

² *Hashiyat Radd al-Muhtar*, vol. 3, p. 724, Book of *al-Iman*.

the commentary to this verse, Allama Haqqi writes: “Wisdom is that inner discernment and vision, by means of which a person understands the requirements of the surrounding circumstances and speaks appropriately according to the time and place. In other words, being firm where firmness is needed, being gentle where gentleness is needed, being implicit where implicitness is needed and being explicit where explicitness is needed, so that benefits can be gained and chaos can be eradicated.”³ For this reason, the noble Prophet ﷺ said: “The word of wisdom is the lost property of the believer; wherever he finds it, he has the most right to it.”⁴ Consider some further narrations regarding wisdom:

- Ibn ‘Abbas [ra] narrates that the noble Prophet ﷺ said: “We (Prophets) have been commanded to address people according to their intellects.”⁵
- Ibn ‘Abbas [ra] narrates that the noble Prophet ﷺ said: “Do not narrate a *hadith* of mine in front of my *Ummah*, except that which their intellects can comprehend.”⁶
- ‘Abdullah ibn Mas‘ud [ra] said: “Do not narrate to a people any *hadith* that is beyond their understanding, otherwise that *hadith* will become a cause for strife (*fitnah*) for some of them.”⁷

If people are narrated something that is beyond their intellect and comprehension; or any verse from the Qur’an or a *hadith* without its proper explanation is quoted, the underlying meaning of which is unclear; or a sentence is brought forth taken out of its original context; then it is clear that people will not accept it due to not understanding it and thus by rejecting the teachings of the Qur’an and the *Hadith*, they will land themselves in confusion and strife. It seems to me that some Muslims of the present time have given preference to emotions over sanity and have removed wisdom from knowledge, a consequence of which is that hatred is increasing against the entire Muslim *Ummah*. Therefore, it is incumbent upon

³ *Tafsir Ruh al-Bayan*.

⁴ *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, Chapters of *al-‘Ilm*, Chapter 19, *Hadith* 2687.

⁵ *Kanz al-‘Ummal*, vol. 10, p. 242, *Hadith* 29282.

⁶ *Ibid.*, *Hadith* 29284.

⁷ *Sahih Muslim*, the *Muqaddimah*, Chapter 3, *Hadith* 14.

Sufi leaders to understand the challenges and requirements of the modern age and bring forth wisdom alongside knowledge. In this regard, a quote from the 19th century American author Robert Green Ingersoll is worth considering: “It is a thousand times better to have common sense without education than to have education without common sense.”

THE MAKKAN ERA

The entire life of Allah’s Messenger Muhammad ﷺ is an excellent example to follow. One part of his life was spent in Makkah, where Muslims were the minority, and the other part of his life was spent in Madinah, where a Muslim state was established under his leadership. In Makkah, he preached and propagated Islam in a peaceful manner. The opposing powers inflicted most severe oppression and atrocities to the extent that some noble Companions were brutally martyred. In spite of this, however, he adopted the way of patience rather than confrontation. He stayed away from the worst kind of terrorists such as Abu Jahl and Abu Lahab and rather than destroying the idols of stone, he strived to enlighten hearts with the light of *tawhid* (Oneness of Allah ﷻ). It was the result of this practical wisdom adopted in Makkah that leaders such as Abu Bakr [ra], ‘Umar [ra], ‘Uthman [ra] and ‘Ali [ra], and devoted followers such as Bilal [ra], ‘Ammar [ra], Salman [ra] and Zayd [ra], were prepared.

Leaders of Muslim countries should follow the example of the Madinan period. Muslims residing in non-Muslim countries, however, should seek to benefit from the example of the Makkan period; whilst following Islam, the way of patience and forbearance should be adopted and with excellent traits of character, they should create their place in the hearts of people. The noble Sufis have always benefitted in non-Muslim countries from the Makkan period and rather than confrontation with governments, they lit candles of love and faith in the hearts of people. In this regard, the esteemed names of ‘Ali Hujwari Data Ganj Bakhsh and Khwaja Mu‘in al-Din Ajmeri appear at the top of the list.

In today’s global village, even Muslim countries themselves are too in a situation that reflects the Makkan period. Despite there being more than

fifty Muslim governments, the genuine way of Islam and its values have not been established anywhere. Therefore, in similar manner, rather than confrontation with world powers, an approach of dialogue and consultation should be formulated, just like the noble Prophet ﷺ established formal treaties and peace agreements with the Jews in Madinah and with the non-Muslims of Makkah at Hudaibiyah. This is because in all events of such confrontations during the 20th century, it is the Muslims who have suffered destruction and ruin. The Muslims should not engage in any further confrontational experiment, rather they should strive for their own unity and serve their people exerting serious effort towards their development and prosperity.

THE 21ST CENTURY

In the first five centuries of Islam, religious sciences and disciplines of knowledge continued to develop, but their way of expression remained traditional and simple; whereas the emerging objections through philosophy and logic were modern and more complex. Islamic scholars of that time realised that it was important to first study philosophy and logic and then present Islam in accordance with the requirements of that modern era in a new logical manner. Hence books of Greek philosophy were translated into Arabic and in light of that philosophy the objections raised against Islam were countered and refuted. A valued contribution in this regard is *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (The Revival of Religious Sciences) in which Imam al-Ghazali skilfully attempted to bring religious sciences to life in a new manner. In addition, he pronounced the pursuit of other sciences and disciplines of knowledge to be an obligation on the community (*fard kifayah*) that are associated with everyday matters of this worldly life such as mathematics, medicine, linguistics, agriculture, cloth manufacturing, politics, cupping, tailoring, etc.⁸

Many of his contemporary scholars opposed this modern view of Imam al-Ghazali, but with the passage of time everyone had to accept that the thinking of Imam al-Ghazali was indeed correct and appropriate. A similar scenario occurred when

Zia-ul-Ummat Justice Pir Muhammad Karam Shah al-Azhari in 1957 in Pakistan, introduced the English Language and various other secular subjects alongside the traditional Islamic sciences syllabus (*dars nizami*), many of the contemporary scholars opposed his view. Today, however, it is acknowledged by all that the thinking of Pir Muhammad Karam Shah al-Azhari was indeed correct and appropriate.

During the Middle Ages when Europe was submerged in the darkness of ignorance, Muslims at that time in Spain made extraordinary progress in science and technology. It was widely said the world over at that time that if one wishes to attain knowledge of science, he must first learn the Arabic Language. However, the circumstances in this day and age have changed. Muslims are in a state of deep sleep, whilst the rest of the world is reaching new horizons and heights in science and technology. Now it is widely said the world over that if one wishes to attain knowledge of science, he must first learn the English Language or some European language. In relation to this, consider some couplets from the poet-philosopher of the East, Allama Muhammad Iqbal:

*O young Muslim!
Have you ever pondered?
What were those galaxies,
of which you are a broken star?*

*You were lovingly nourished by that great nation,
Which crushed the crowns of empires beneath its feet.*

*We have lost the heritage inherited from our ancestors;
From the heights of the heavens,
the sky has thrown us to the lows of the earth.*

In the 21st century, science and technology have advanced to such unprecedented levels that today labourers and builders are being replaced by machines and robots that are themselves contributing to the construction of desired houses and buildings. Smartphones have allowed a person to see and speak with and to observe the movements of another person in the palm of one's own hand thousands of miles away whilst sitting in a closed room. We could not have imagined this development twenty years ago and what extraordinary advancement science is yet to achieve in the future is simply beyond our

⁸ *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, Book of *al-'Ilm*, Section: Communally Obligatory Disciplines, p. 26.

comprehension. Nevertheless, this wide and vast planet has today developed into a global village, and intellectuals of modern times have stacked up heaps of logical, scientific and intellectual objections against the beliefs (*aqā'id*) and teachings (*ahkam*) of Islam as well as its religious disciplines (*shari'ah*) and spiritual traditions (*tariqah*). Once again it is the need of the hour for Islamic scholars to understand and reflect on the requirements of the contemporary age and present Islam as well as Sufism in a modern, logical and up-to-date manner in accordance with the requirements of the modern world. More than nine hundred years have passed since the time when Imam al-Ghazali wrote the *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*; therefore, if a new '*Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*' for this age is now written in a contemporary manner, it would indeed be a great and exceptional service to Islam in the present era. The 20th century British historian Arnold Joseph Toynbee wrote: "Civilizations declined when their leaders stopped responding creatively."

A PRACTICAL WORLD

Sufism is a practical concept in which experience and prevailing condition is far more important than words and mere rhetoric. In the teachings of the noble Sufis, there lies greater emphasis on action and practice rather than just thought and contemplation. This is because action is a tangible reality that determines the success or failure of an individual, for Allah ﷻ says: "A person only has what he strived for." [*Qur'an* 53:39]. The poet-philosopher Allama Iqbal writes:

*The outcome of life is dependent upon actions,
they can lead to paradise or hell.
This statue of clay (man), by its nature,
is neither of light (angel) nor of fire (dweller of hell).*

In another verse, Allah ﷻ says: "Indeed Allah does not change the condition of a people until those people do not change what is in themselves." [*Qur'an* 13:11]. The poet-philosopher Allama Iqbal writes:

*God has not changed the condition of a nation to date;
Which is not intent on changing its own condition.*

In the history of Islam, the *Ahl al-Sunnah wa'l-Jama'ah*, i.e. Sufi Muslims, have always remained the prevalent mainstream majority (*al-sawad al-*

a'zam). Whenever the Muslim *Ummah* faced a difficult time, the noble Sufis came out of their spiritual sanctuaries (*khanqah*) and into the practical world performing their vital role in leading the Muslim *Ummah*. H.A.R. Gibb, the Scottish historian of the last century, during an address at the Oxford University once reflected on the notion that in the history of Islam, there were many occasions when the culture of Islam was severely opposed. But, in spite of this, it could not be defeated. One main reason for this was that Sufism and the wisdom of the Sufis would come to its aid rapidly, granting it such energy and strength that no power could confront it.⁹

If the previous century is assessed, however, it becomes apparent that this mainstream majority is in a constant state of decline, and due to minor and insignificant factors, it is encountering division upon division and is being left restricted to individual mosques and *khanqahs*. Due to the static condition and stagnation of this mainstream majority as well as differences within it, terrorism is spreading to such an extent that the whole world has become deeply concerned and worried.

Therefore, the time has now come for the Sufis to come out of their *khanqahs*, forgive and forget their mutual grievances for the benefit and greater good of the Muslim *Ummah*, and with unity counter and defeat the evil of terrorism. For if the surge of terrorism continues to increase in this way, then these *khanqahs* and mausoleums will end up being destroyed by bombs and rockets. In this regard, reflect upon the following two couplets of the poet-philosopher of the East, Allama Muhammad Iqbal:

*Come out of the khanqahs,
and enact the tradition of Shabbir (Imam Husayn);
For the spiritual mendicancy of the khanqah
is a mere source of sorrow and sadness.*

*O unaware Muslims!
If you do not understand, you will perish;
And your story will not even be remembered,
amongst the stories of the past.*



⁹ *Terrorism and the Fitnah of the Khawarij*, p. 584.