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'Abd al-Raḥman Chishtī & the Bhagavadgita: "Unity of Religion" Theory in Practice

Roderic Vassie

INTRODUCTION

The legendary Shaykh Ṣan'ān of 'Aṭṭār's *Manṭiq al-ṭayr* is exceptional in Sufi literature in turning apostate—albeit temporarily—in his quest for greater fulfillment. This being the case, what does it teach us about the realization, perceived in the writings of so many eminent Sufi masters, of a transcendental unity of religion? Given the extent of the debt owed by Sufi writers to the Koran and Sunna for inspiration when measured against their borrowings from other religious sources, has anything been said by affirming the unity of religions other than that a set of beliefs, rites, laws, etc. recognized as falling within the group 'religions' must, by definition, share some similarities with other members of the same group? To take the question a stage further, have Sufis ever actually taught that all Islam's necessary goals can be achieved by following the religious teachings of one's choice? Is it not rather the case that the interchangeability of religious symbols and ideas in Sufi verse and prose forms part of the art of mystical allegory, of which the Persian-speaking Sufis were consummate masters?

On the basis of 'Abd al-Raḥmān Chishtī's Indo-Persian treatise, *Mir'āt al-ḥaqā'iq* it is clear that in the Mughal empire Sufis conceived of only one tradition as capable of guiding the believer to the *maqṣūd-i bīrang* (sublime goal),[1] all other ways being to a greater or lesser extent deficient. That tradition was Islam, albeit in its broadest Koranic sense ("He named you 'Muslims' previously and in this book." Koran, XXII 78).

'ABD AL-RAḤMĀN CHISHTĪ

'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Abd al-Rasūl ibn Qāsim ibn Shāh Budh 'Abbāsī 'Alawī Chishtī belonged to the Ṣābirī branch of the Chishtī Order. He inherited the mantle of Shaykh from his brother, Ḥāmid, upon the latter's death in 1623. Initially based in Rudauli, he later moved west to a small village called Dhanīthī on the banks of the Gomti River nearer to Lucknow. In 1683, nearing the age of a hundred, he died and was buried in the building he had himself constructed.

Biographies of the Ṣābirī branch show that he was not only blood relative but also a spiritual descendant of his great-grandfather, Budh. However, in a rare autobiographical passage in his most important work, the hagiographical *Mir'āt al-*

367-378

1. British Library MS.. Or.1883, f.259r.

545. R Vassie, *Persian Interpretations of the Bhagavadgita in the Mughal Period with Special Reference to the Sufi Version of 'Abd al-Rahman Chishti*, SOAS PhD thesis, 1988-89.

2 5 Haziran 2015

262 ALAM, Muzaffar. Strategy and imagination in a Mughal Sufi story of creation. *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 49 ii (2012) pp. 151-195. "Examines a seventeenth-century text that attempts to reconcile Hindu and Muslim accounts of human genesis and cosmogony. The text, Mir'āt al-Makhlūqāt ('Mirror of Creation'), written by a noted Mughal Sufi author Shaikh 'Abd al-Rahman Chishti, purportedly a translation of a Sanskrit text, adopts rhetorical strategies and mythological elements of the Purāna tradition."

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MADDE YAYIMLANDIKTAN

276 WASSERSTROM, Steve M. Jewish studies and comparative religion in the Islamicate renaissance. *Islam and religious diversity. Volume I: Judaism.* Ed. Lloyd Ridgeon. London & New York: Routledge, 2012, (Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies), pp. 142-171. From early Islam to 10th century. Originally published in *Between Muslim and Jew: the problem of symbiosis under Early Islam* by S.M.Wasserstrom (Princeton, 1995) pp.136-164.

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through which the soul attempts to comprehend its own nature. Therefore Bāyazīd ultimately denounced them as a deceit.

The fundamental experiences of the soul in tension toward the divine need to find expression, however. Sometimes this can be done verbally, through the abstract technical terms of Sufism, through the ecstatic expressions of the mystics, or through scriptural passages that can act as the locus for the human-divine encounter. But it is also necessary for these experiences to take form, to be refracted in the medium of consciousness and assume the density of symbols taken from the natural world. Then, as Rumi put it, the secret of the beloved can be revealed through stories about others. The poetic imagination uses imagery to express experience. If the poet is successful, the images will continue to function transparently; if the poet is less successful, the images will still work on the level of abstract allegory. But from the point of view of the mystic, the images become false when they solidify to the point of blocking out vision altogether, and take on an importance in themselves. The symbolism of birds and flight always remained, for Rūzbihān, a pliant and dynamic one, in which the lover's nightingale at any moment might be transformed into the beloved's *Sīmurgh*. The alienation of existence was felt as a cage, from which the soul sought escape by flight, at last to find the heavenly garden, or even to perch on the wrist of the celestial hunter. The soul's ascent through self-transcendence was symbolized by the burning or ripping away of its wings, which were ever replaced by new ones. Birds and flight imagery thus formed an extensive complex of images from the natural world, one which was particularly well adapted for the expression of the realities of the soul. Rūzbihān reminds us that the flight of the bird covers the distance between heaven and earth; its arrival on earth and its departure to heaven imitate and embody the journey of the soul from its origin to its end, just as the bird's song can praise God or deliver a scriptural epiphany to humanity. When, therefore, we read Persian poets telling for the thousandth time of the nightingale's song to the rose, or the bird who nests in eternity, we should not be lulled into dullness, anaesthetized by mere repetition. Mystical authors like Rūzbihān can help us recover the experiential power of a symbol even when it becomes threadbare in the hands of lesser writers. Then, perhaps, when we encounter these symbols, we will follow the advice of one of Rūzbihān's followers, and recall that "These are the places of the descent of the *Sīmurgh* of the spirit . . . [and] the ascent of the *'Anqā* of the heart."[1]

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The Legacy of Mediaeval Persian
Sufism, London, 1992, s. 367-377.
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Kütüphanede Mevcuttur

1. Ilāhī Sīmābī, *Manāzil al-qulūb*, in *Rūzbihān-nāma*, p. 404.

MADDE YAYIMLANDIKTAN SONRA GELEN DOKÜMAN
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