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The Ascetic Phase in the Development of Tasawwuf

Farhat Gill*

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Abstract

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Development of Tasawwuf [Urdu: Mysticism] in Islam involved emphasis on such aspects as ascetic piety, devotional love, direct knowledge (Ma'rifah) and commitment to Shari'a/Law. This paper is concerned with the ascetic phase, also termed as "Madinian Party" by some scholars. During this early phase in Tasawwuf, Sufis [Urdu: Mystics] of the time emphasized cleanliness of the soul and inner reform and education. Earnestly impressed by the Quranic teachings about the impending Day of Judgment, early Sufis directed themselves to prepare for the next world. A person was always to remember that this world is but a temporary habitation. Worldly gifts were believed to be characterized by vanity and temptations. Such temptations included power, riches, pleasure, and joy of parenthood. They were not indeed to be rejected or avoided but had to be used with a deep sense of awful responsibilities which they entail. The list of early Sufis has usually included Hassan Al Basri, Habib al Ajmami, Fuzail Bin Ayaz, Raabia Basri and Abu Bin Adham. But it is pertinent to include such personages as Abu Zar Ghiffari and Ali Bin Hussain among them.

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Introduction

The subject of Tasawwuf is a complex one and several views have been put forward about its nature and origin in Islam: Christianity, Hellenism, Manichaeism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Parseeism even Taoism, have all been suggested as its main sources.¹ But Muslim mystics have adamantly held that Tasawwuf is based on the Qur'an and the traditions [Urdu: Sunnah] of the Prophet, and this is now being recognised by the Western scholarship on the subject.² Commenting on different views, Nizami holds: "That Tasawwuf is essentially Islamic in its origin is as true as the fact that as the mystic movement spread to various regions it assimilated and imbibed elements different from its own".³ As Tasawwuf consists in 'interiorization' and a deep and restless devotion to God, to the exclusion of all earthly ties, its spirit may be traced back to the days of the Prophet who himself used to retire to the Cave of Hira near Mecca to meditate for a certain period of time every year. The *Sufis* really imitate the Prophet's devotion, vigils, fasts and acts of self-abnegation and self-sacrifice. The Prophet slept on the floor, his bed consisted of a sheet of cloth, half of which was spread on the ground and with the remaining half he covered his body. His house was a small hut without proper door and roof. His food was coarse barley bread which could only be swallowed with the help of water. He ate at the time of keeping fast and at the time of breaking it. He had few earthly attachments and few worldly engagements.⁴ He taught that 'God is nearer to man than his neck vein'.⁵ He laid the greatest emphasis on the need of personal surrender and submission to God. Such elements in the teachings and

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- 1 Julian Baldick, *Mystical Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1983), pp. 13-30; Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *History of Sufism in India, Vol. II* (New Delhi: Mushiram Monoharlal Publishers Ltd., 1983), p. 50.
 - 2 Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and politics in India during the Thirteenth Century* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1961), p. 50.
 - 3 Nizami, *Op. Cit.*, p.50.
 - 4 *Ibid.*
 - 5 *Ibid.*

Sunnah of the Prophet are the basis of the development of Muslim piety.

Notwithstanding the *Sufi* claim that the Qur'an and Sunnah are the basic sources of Tasawwuf, it seems that *Sufism* developed over time as authentic response to two perceived ills interacting in the Muslim expanding society, namely public affairs and intellectual life. In such historical development, *Sufism* interacted with outside influences, usually on its own grounds. In this connection, six broad, more or less overlapping, phases can be identified.⁶ At each stage, there were different socio-political problems and, keeping the Qur'an and Sunnah in view, *Sufis* responded differently, according to circumstances.

The early phase (661-815) coincided with the Umayyad rule and first century of Abbasid rule. Disenchanted with the worldly attitude of rulers, many sensitive souls took to asceticism, developing sentiments of individual piety and fear of God, especially with regard to the world to come. During the second phase, covering the ninth and early tenth centuries, *Sufis* were imbued with love of God, intense longing to achieve union with Him, thereby hoping to obtain *ma'rifah* (gnosis). This involved following a path, *Tariqa*, to reach God.⁷ During this phase, *Sufis* were confronted with moral as well as legal laxities among rulers promoting purposes contrary to the spirit of *Shari'a* law. Also there was a storm of rationalist thinking inspired mainly by Greek Philosophy. Both of these two factors seemed to work to the weakening of moral and intellectual life of the Muslim society. Response came in the form of search for supra-intellectual source of knowledge, gnosis, *ma'rifah*.⁸

Sufis during the period seem to have been divided into two types; those whose utterances of their love of God were

6 Wahid Bakhsh Sial Rabbani, *Quranic Origin of Sufism, the Association of Spiritual Training Pakistan* (Lahore: n. p. n. d.), p. 2.

7 R.S. Bhatnagar. *Dimensions of Classical Sufi Thought* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited), 1984.

8 Muhammad Iqbal. *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia: A Contribution to the History of Muslim Philosophy* (Lahore: Bazm-i-Iqbal), 1954.

made in "intoxication" (i.e. intoxicated with love of God and forgetting every thing else) and those who said things with "sobriety".⁹ Such intoxication led to the famous execution of Al-Hallaj, which manifested a severe conflict between the *Sufis* and *Ulema*. The third phase covered the late tenth century in which attempts were made to remove misunderstanding between *Shari'a* and *Tariqa*.¹⁰ *Sufis* tried to indicate points of harmony between purposes of *Shari'a* and their own practices, their ways, their *Tariqa*. During the fourth phase, which covered the eleventh century, a powerful case was made regarding the identity of purpose between *Shari'a* and *Tariqa*, and complementarity of their roles.¹¹ There was an attempt to represent *Sufism* as the true interpretation of Islam, with a great measure of success. The fifth phase was the synthesis by Al-Ghazali (d. 1111), which established the interdependence and oneness of *Shari'a* and *Tariqa* among Ahle-Sunnat Wal-Jamaat.¹² During the sixth phase *Ulema* were attracted to *Sufism* and there arose *silsilas* to organize society on true Islamic lines.¹³ Shaikh Shahabuddin Suhrawardi (d. 1234 A.D) and Maulana Jalal-ud-din Rumi (d.1273 A.D) who consolidated the thought of their predecessors and gave to mysticism a consistent philosophy, a discipline and a warm fund of emotions. *Awarif-ul-Maarif*, the work of Shahabuddin Suhrawardi, both in theory and in practice, proved to be monumental in the organization of *silsilas*, all over the Muslim world of the time.¹⁴

| 9 Abu Bakr Kalabazi, *Kitab at-t'a'arrufli Madhhab ahl at-tasawwuf* (Cairo: n.p., 1934) and tr. A.J. Arberry, (Cambridge: n.p., 1935).

| 10 Abu'l Qasim Qusairi 'Abd Al-Karim, *Ar-Risalah al-qusariyyah*, (Cairo: n.p., 1385/1960).

| 11 Ali Hijwiri, *Kashfu'l Mahjub*, (Lahore: n.p.) 1923, English tr. R.A. Nicholson, (London), 1911.

| 12 Abu Hamid Ghazali, *al-Munqiz Min al-Zalal*, 1964, English tr. *The faith and practice of Ghazali* (London: W. Montgomery Watt, 1965).

| 13 Spencer J. Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (London: Oxford University Press), 1971.

| 14 Shihab ad-din Umar Suhrawardi, *Awarif-ul-Ma'arif*, Cairo, 1939, tr. By H.W. Clarke (Calcutta: n.p., 1891).

Study of tasawwuf with such historical perspective demands a lot of work and could be the subject of several volumes. This article attempts a much more modest task and concentrates on the early period in the development of tasawwuf. This period is called the ascetic phase. The subject of ascetic phase will be dealt with in two parts. Part I will elaborate the style of rule, which was perceived as antithetical to the practices of four right-guided caliphs, but more so as having deviated from the Prophetic model. The consequent emphasis on pomp and show among rulers led sensitive souls to shun such rule. Part II emphasizes on the Qur'an and Prophetic Sunnah as sources that provided leading comfort to ascetic people to Love of God. Love-of-God aspect of asceticism historically led to the next phase of Tasawwuf, which subject is planned to be dealt with in a separate article.

I

The ascetic phase in the development of Sufism coincided with the Umayyad rule and a century, or so, of Abbasid rule. Disenchanted with materialism and this worldly attitude of rulers and consequent spread of desire for riches and power, many sensitive souls took to asceticism during this period.¹⁵ They developed sentiments of individual piety and fear of God, especially with regard to life in the world to come. The political system at the time of the Prophet was fully based on Islamic principles of equality, justice and brotherhood. There was no distinction between ruler and ruled in the dispensation of justice and distribution of facilities for the needy. Application of law was universal and nobody was beyond the purview of law. The just nature of the system is, of course, contained in the Qur'an and Sunnah. It was reiterated in the last sermon of the Prophet.¹⁶

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¹⁵ Rizvi, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 22-23.

¹⁶ The Prophet of Islam delivered a sermon during his first and last *Hadji*, Pilgrimage of Mecca, in the Islamic Calendar year 10 A.H., i.e. 632 A.D. In Islamic history, the sermon is known as *Khutaba-e-Hajjutul-Vida*. The sermon particularly dwelt on human equality before God and enunciated human rights and obligations.

After his death, the model of public affairs imparted by the Prophet was emulated when the first four Caliphs held the reins of power.¹⁷

However, the political system which came after the right-guided caliphate has been aptly described by a Muslim scholar as a '*malukiyyat* (Urdu: Imperialism),'¹⁸ monarchy, the government cutting itself from the people at large. The Umayyad Dynasty (661-750) used the public treasury as if it was their personal property. The collectiveness and transparency of public life as could obtain under an Islamic system vanished. Political life was no longer guided by ethical principles of Islam. Guards were put on the door of the ruler to emphasize his inaccessibility to the ruled.¹⁹

Sentiments of some of the later critics of the Umayyad rule were such as they advocated resistance to them. Al-Jahiz vehemently criticized Umayyad ruler for their abandonment of Islamic government.²⁰

However, Ibn Khaldun rehabilitates Mu'awiya and tries to absolve him of the charge by Muslim writers that Mu'awiya converted the caliphate into kingship. Ibn Khaldun defends assumption of kingship on the ground that '*asabiyya* inevitably brought kingship in its train. He sees the first civil war (*fitna*), the war between 'Ali and Mu'awiya, as a necessary result of *asabiyya*.²¹ With reference to the

17 Noel. J. Coulson, *The History of Islamic Law* (Eden Burgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1961).

18 Abul-Ala Maududi, *Khilafat-o-Malukiyyat* (Lahore: Islamic Publications, n.d.), p.19.

19 Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *Tareekh-e-Mashaikh-e-Chisht* (Karachi: Madina Publishing Company, n.d.), p.21.

20 Ann K.S. Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam: An Introduction to the Study of Islamic Political Theory: The Jurists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 62.

21 Ibn Khaldun coined the term '*Asabiyya*' (Arabic: *asabiya*) and refers to social solidarity with an emphasis on unity, group consciousness, and social cohesion, -originally in a context of "tribalism" and "clanism". It is now used for modern nationalism as well, resembling also communities. It was a familiar term in the pre-Islamic era, but became popularized in Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah* where it is described as the fundamental bond of human society and the basic motive force of history. '*Asabiyya* is neither necessarily nomadic nor based on blood relations. In the modern period,

later Umayyads, Ibn Khaldun does state: "As far as their worldly purposes and intentions were concerned, they acted as the nature of royal authority required. They forgot the deliberate planning and the reliance upon truth that had guided the activities of their predecessors.²² Under the circumstances Abbasid propaganda gained strength against the Umayyads: 'Abbasids took over the government, later on, but eventually they also took to luxury. They became enmeshed in worldly affairs and, in the view of Ibn Khaldun, "turned their backs on Islam. Therefore, God permitted them to be ruined, and (He permitted) the Arabs to be completely deprived of their power, which He gave to others".²³ Thus, continues Ibn Khaldun, the caliphate was transformed into kingship.

Under these circumstances, many persons became disenchanted with rulers. The behaviour of *Sufis* emphasized cleanliness of the soul and inner reform and education. As pietists, they were scrupulous in their observance of rules of the *Shari'a* in ritual and social matters. Moreover, earnestly impressed with the Qur'anic teachings about the impending Day of Judgment and imminent doom of this world, they directed themselves to prepare for the hereafter. They were appalled by the worldly attitude of many of the Umayyad and Abbasid ruling elite who were busy enjoying the riches afforded them. The pious men shunned the world and its affairs, and were contemptuous of its worthlessness and wary of its temptations.²⁴ Asceticism was their way of life. Such early *sufis* were a "number of men and a most remarkable woman, who were repelled by the worldliness,

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the term is generally analogous to solidarity. However, the term is often negatively associated because it can sometimes suggest loyalty to one's group regardless of circumstances, or partisanship.

22 Lambton, *Op. Cit.*, p. 173.

23 *Ibid.*

24 Majed Fakhry, 'The Rise and Development of Islamic Mysticism', *History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 235.

which had come upon people in high places". They were quiet, gentle and self-effacing persons.²⁵

Among the *Sufis* of the period we can include Hasan al-Basri (d. 728 A. D), Fuzail bin Ayad (d. 803), Rabia Basri (c. 752, 801?) and Abu bin Adham (d. 777-8), Habib al-Ajmai (d.737), Sufyan Sawri (d. 777-8) and Maruf Karkhi (d. 815).

One of the early ascetics was Abu Zar Ghaffari (d.652 A.D), who spoke out even against some of laxities occurring because of the kind-hearted nature of the third caliph, Hazrat Usman. Abdu Zar was transported to Syria, then under the governorship of Mu'awiya in luxury. He reminded the rulers that all that was a far cry from the Islamic heritage that the Prophet Muhammad had given to the community. He built a hut out of blankets on the outskirts of the Damascus and began living in that with his family. Abu Zar criticized the governor for extravagance, delivering speeches in the central mosque. People began to gather around Abu Zar and listen to his discourses. The poor and the disposed were attracted to him and the rich were scared of him.²⁶

Ali Ibn Hussain was a known voice against Umayyad excesses. Here is his supplication in that connection:²⁷

O' Thou! To whom the tidings of complaints are not unknown! And O' Thou who doth not require the evidence of witnesses to their reports, O' Thou whose help is nigh to the oppressed and O' Thou whose assistance is far removed from the wicked! Verily, Thou knowest O' my Lord! What hath come upon me from so and so the son of so and so, of that which Thou didst prohibit him from doing; and what power he hath gained over me by means of that which Thou didst forbid him, because of pride in the possessions which are from Thee; and in utter disregard to Thy prohibition to him... and by Thy strength restrain my oppressor and my enemy from overwhelming me; and with Thy power, turn aside his sharpness from me, and let him be engaged in what immediately surrounds him, and render him powerless, against that to which he is hostile.

There were other famous critics of perceived untoward rule. A famous personage, learned in Islamic law and at the

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25 H.M. Balyuzi, *Muhammad and the Course of Islam* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1976), p. 276.

26 Rizvi, *Op. Cit.*, p.22.

27 Ali Ibn Hussain, *Op. Cit.*, p.39

same time an ascetic of his time, was Hassan al-Basri. He went into hiding in 705 as a response to his bold criticism of the repressive religio-political policies of Hajjaj bin Yusuf, the Umayyad Governor of Iraq. He was forced to remain in hiding until Hajjaj's death in 714. As an ascetic, he did not approve of rebellion against, or the removal of, vicious governors. As a true ascetic, his view was that violent actions of tyrants were a punishment sent by God. As such, they could not be opposed by the sword. On the other hand, they had to be endured with patience. Hasan al-Basri condemned the possession of riches and of all worldly attachments. In his view, those subjects to worldly pleasures were sinners, without any concern for their faith. Sinners were fully responsible for their actions. He preached asceticism in his sermons. He expressed his ideas this way: "Make this world into a bridge over which you cross but on which you do not build! And 'Re-polish these hearts (the seats of religious feeling), for they very quickly grow rusty".²⁸

Abu 'Abdullah Sufyan ibn Sa'id al Sawri (715-778 A.D.), another leading *Sufi* of that period, was born at Kufa. Although he acquired a good knowledge of Hadis and law, he chose to become an ascetic. As he did openly disapprove of the political situation in Kufa at the time he was forced to escape to Mecca in 774-75, and was obliged to hide from the state persecution. Later, Sufyan left for Basra, where he died in 777-78. Sufyan Sawri is believed to have said that the best king was he who associated with '*ulema*' but that the worst '*alim*' was he who associated with kings. To Sufyan Sawri, "The pomp and luxury of the Umayyad and the Abbasids were anathema. He chose a life of seclusion, to pray and meditate".²⁹

When Abbasids were moved eastward, a strong Persian influence came on their society. Such influence manifested itself in poetry, science, art and luxury, and came to be associated with the Baghdad court. In the words of a

28 Rizvi, *Op. Cit.*, p.22.

29 Balyuzi, *Op. Cit.*, p.276.

historian, Abu Bakr and Umar would hardly have recognized the Caliphate in its Baghdad incarnation.³⁰

The caliphs were no longer first among Moslem equals; they were oriental despots. Some of them were enlightened, many were not. They presided over a court renowned for pomp and luxury and over a society renowned in history for its achievements in science, mathematics, astronomy, poetry and civil administration.³¹

The court was corrupted by wealth and luxury. Some of the caliphs took to wine-drinking and abandoned their role of religious exemplars. Administrative power came delegated to bureaucrats and tax collectors. Hired provincials replaced Arab troops in the army. Turkish mercenaries, imported to protect the caliphate court, gradually seized control of it. As such caliphs were reduced to a puppet under tutelage of mercenaries.

Fuzail bin Iyad is reputed to have put out his lamp in order not to see Haroon al-Rasheed who had come to visit him. Sufyan Sawri hid himself when he was offered a government job. Imam Abu Hanifah behaved in the same way.³² All such persons were ascetic in their life-style, mainly owing to this worldly behaviour of rulers.

II

In its early development, tasawwuf could be largely thought of in terms of asceticism or what Gibb has called "Madinian Piety".³³ Ascetic stage of *Sufism* emphasized piety — features of other worldliness — and avoidance/ criticism of rulers, who were not liked for their pomp and show and perceived deviance from a style of life enjoined the Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet. Most scholars are agreed on the

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30 Lippman, *Op. Cit.*, p.77.

31 *Ibid.*

32 *Ibid.*

33 H.A.R. Gibb, *Mohammedanism: An Historical Survey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), p.76.

Qur'an and practice of the Prophet as the vital sources of ascetic behaviour among early Muslims.³⁴

Among the very earliest generations of Muslims, in all parts of the Islamic world, there were many people who brought the spirit of devotion into their daily activities. To such persons, Islam was, above all, a discipline of the soul. They believed in a stern ascetic creed. Such a creed meant that every man go about his work with the fear of eternal punishment ever before his eyes. A person was always to remember that this world is but a temporary habitation. Every gift that the world could offer was vanity and temptation. Such temptations included power, riches, pleasure, learning, the joy of parenthood. They were not indeed to be rejected or avoided, but had to be used with a deep sense of the awful responsibilities which they entail.³⁵

Nicholson also emphasizes that the earliest Sufis were, in fact, ascetics and quietists. They had an over-whelming consciousness of sin, combined with a dread of Judgment Day and the torments of Hell-fire. It is true that there is a vivid description of such things in the Qur'an. The dread of Judgment Day drove them to seek salvation. The Qur'anic warning was believed to be that salvation depended on the will of Allah. The ascetic took to fasting and praying and pious works as ways of complete and unquestioning submission to the divine will. Thus the mainspring of Muslim religious life during the eighth century was fear – fear of God, fear of Hell, fear of death and fear of sin. This was so particularly among the ascetics.³⁶

Elsewhere, Nicholson thus depicts it:³⁷

In the second century of the Hijra there arose a spontaneous and wide-spread movement towards world-flight. Dreaming the wrath to come, thousands of men and women gave themselves up to the religious life, either singly or in companionship with a few friends.

34 *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

37 Reynold Nicholson, *The Idea of Personality in Sufism* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf Publishers), Rpt., 1966, pp. 9-10.

The consciousness of sin lay heavy on them: the slightest offence against the Law had to be expiated by a long penance. From the injunctions which they found in the Koran to think of God and trust in God they developed the practice of *dhikr* and the doctrine of *tawakkul*.

We have seen earlier how Abu Zar criticized the Umayyad rule as a deviation from the Prophetic model. On his own authority, there is mention of ascetic attitudes inculcated by the Prophet of Islam. The Prophet, he says, gave him a seven-fold charge:³⁸

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To love the poor and be accessible to them, to look always to them that were below and not to those above him, to demand naught of any man, to preserve his loyalty towards his kin even when he was enraged against them, to speak the truth always even if it was bitter; not to let himself be frightened when engaged in any cause for the sake of Allah and to cry out frequently.

The notion of crying is important as there existed 'criers' or 'weepers' among the early ascetics. A famous one belonged to the House of Prophet, namely, Ali Bin Hussain. His supplications to God have been collected. One supplication in the tradition of 'weepers' is:³⁹

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My Lord! Verily Thou wouldst search me out if I flee, and capture me if I run away. If Thou punish me, verily I deserve it, and it would be an act of justice from Thee O' Lord! By Thy names which are treasured-up, and by Thy glory which the curtains hide, to pity my impatient soul and my decaying, trembling bones, which cannot bear the heat of Thy sun, then now shall they bear the heat of Thy fire! And they cannot bear the roar of Thy thunder, then how shall they bear Thy wrath!

In some cases, the ascetic view of the world and vivid consciousness of God as a transcendent Personality caused early Muslims to crush their human affections. There is a story from the life of Fudayl ibn 'Iyad.⁴⁰

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"One day he had in his lap a child four years old, and changed to give it a kiss, as is the way of fathers. The child said, 'Father, do you love me?' 'Yes' said Fudayl. 'Do you love God?' 'Yes'. 'How many

38 Reuben Levy, *The Social Structure of Islam* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1957), p.201.

39 Ali Bin Hussain, *Op. Cit.*, p.187.

40 Reynold Nicholson, A. *The Mystics of Islam* (London & Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul), Rpt. 1975, p.109.

hearts have you?' 'One', 'Then' asked the child, 'how can you love two with one heart?' Fudayl perceived that the child's words were a divine admonition. In his zeal for God he began to beat his head and repented of his love for the child, and gave his heart wholly to God".

Notwithstanding, the Fear of God and of Wrath as major basis of tasawwuf among early ascetics, there was also an element of love, howsoever indistinct. The latter became quite pronounced in the asceticism of the female saint, Rabi'a bint Isma'il al-Adwiya. Her boundless love of and devotion to God and her numerous highly intense ecstatic experiences made her one of the greatest of all Islamic mystics. Rabi'a's prayers epitomized her unique understanding of divine love. They included the following:⁴¹

'O God, if I worship Thee for fear of Hell, burn me in Hell, and if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise; but if I worship Thee for Thy own sake, grudge me not Thy everlasting beauty.

O God, my whole occupation and all my desire in this world, of all worldly things, is to remember Thee, and in the world to come, of all things of the world to come, is to meet Thee. This is on my side, as I have stated; now do Thou whatsoever Thou wilt'

Rabi'a was one of those early outstanding mystics of Islam, who introduced the concept of disinterested love of God to *Sufism*. Afterwards, it was developed by other *Sufis*, particularly Hun-un al-Misri during the ninth and the first half of the tenth centuries.

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41 Rizvi, *Op. Cit.*, p.31.