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AḤMAD SERHENDĪ (1)

AḤMAD SERHENDĪ, SHAIKH, outstanding Mughal mystic and prolific writer on Sufi themes. Born in the city of Sirhind in the Panjab in 971/1563-64, he studied religious sciences first with his father, the Sufi Shaikh ʿAbd-al-Aḥad, and later with several other teachers in the city of Sialkot. He also spent some time at the court of Akbar in Agra, where he debated theological issues with the famous vizier Abu'l-Fażl ʿAllāmī and assisted the latter's brother Fayżī in his literary endeavors. A decisive event in his life occurred in 1008/1599-1600, when he came to Delhi and was initiated into the Naqšbandī order of Sufis by Ḵᵛāǰa Moḥammad Bāqī Beʾllāh; from then on Serhendī devoted himself to teaching and propagating the Naqšbandī concepts of *taṣawwof*. He became a leading *pīr* of the order and wrote numerous epistles and books in which he described his spiritual experiences and explained various issues in Muslim theology and mysticism; from time to time he also expressed his views on the religious policies which the Mughal empire ought to adopt. In 1028/1619 Serhendī was summoned to Jahāngīr's court and imprisoned. According to the emperor's memoirs, Serhendī was punished because he was an arrogant impostor, sending his disciples to every town and city to deceive people; his book called the *Maktūbāt*, moreover, contained many useless theories which were leading people to heresy (*Tūzok-e Jahāngīrī*, ed. Aḥmad Khan, Aligarh, 1864, pp. 272-73). Naqšbandī hagiography, in contrast, maintains that Serhendī's imprisonment was deviously brought about by the Shiʿite nobles of the court, who resented his unrelenting opposition to their religious views. His imprisonment lasted for about a year, after which he was honored by the emperor and released. He then continued his Sufi activities until his death in

1034/1624.

Serhendī's literary works may be divided into two groups. Before his initiation into the Naqšbandī order, he wrote a rather conventional refutation of the Shiʿite creed, entitled *Resāla dar radd-e rawāfeż* (publ. with his *Maktūbāt*). His *Eṯbāt al-nobūwa* (Hyderabad, Sind, 1383/1963-64), which probably dates from the same period and is the only work which Serhendī wrote entirely in Arabic, reproduces the familiar *kalām* arguments designed to prove the necessity of prophecy and breaks little new ground. More significant are the works written after his initiation into the Naqšbandī order, most of which treat Sufi themes. Pride of place belongs to Serhendī's celebrated collection of letters, *Maktūbāt-e emām-e rabbānī* (Lucknow, 1294/1877), which was repeatedly hailed as a landmark in the development of Muslim religious thought in the Indian subcontinent. The three volumes of the Persian *Maktūbāt* comprise 534 letters, addressed to nearly 200 persons. Most of the recipients were Sufis; a few were officials at the Mughal court (Y. Friedmann, *Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī. An Outline of his Thought and a Study of his Image in the Eyes of Posterity*, Montreal and London, 1971, pp. 1-4). These letters are evidently the most important source for understanding Serhendī's thought; however, since only a few responses to Serhendī's letters seem to be extant, utmost circumspection must be used while trying to employ the evidence they provide to infer the influence Serhendī had upon his contemporaries. The range of Serhendī's correspondence must certainly be considered a *prima facie* indication of his popularity as a Sufi teacher, and yet one can not conclude from that fact alone that he was successful in propagating the more controversial aspects of his thought beyond the narrow circle of his closest disciples. Caution is especially needed when trying to answer the key question: Was Serhendī's influence on Jahāngīr and the Mughal dynasty really as decisive as many modern writers have believed it to be? (See, e.g., B. A. Faruqi, *The Mujaddid's Conception of Tawhid*, Lahore, 1940, pp. 14-27; K. A. Nizami, "Naqshbandi Influence on Mughal Rulers and Politics," *Islamic Culture* 39, 1965, pp. 41-52; and I. H. Qureshi in P. M. Holt et al., eds., *The Cambridge History of Islam*, Cambridge, 1970, II, pp. 62-63.)

Serhendī's letters deal with a wide variety of subjects; his ideas about the spiritual nature of the period in which he lived are especially noteworthy because of their messianic overtones. It is well known that classical Islamic thought has held a pessimistic view of history. Numerous early traditions maintain that history was at its best during the period of the Prophet. When

this period came to an end, a process of steady deterioration set in; this process will continue until the end of days, when a series of miraculous events (*ašrāṭ al-sāʿa*) will herald the coming of the *mahdī*, his victorious struggle against the false messiah (*dajjāl*), the establishment of righteousness on earth, and, finally, the Day of Judgment (Boḵārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, ed. Krehl, Leiden, 1862-1908, II, pp. 416-17; *Sonan Ebn Māja*, Cairo, 1953, II, pp. 1295-1372; etc.). While Serhendī agrees that the ideal period of history was the period of the Prophet and that it was indeed followed by a steep decline, he does not subscribe to the idea that this decline is necessarily irreversible. Serhendī maintains that the lowest ebb of Islamic history, which according to the classical view should have been attained just before the Day of Judgment, was actually reached in his own lifetime with the completion of the first millennium of the Islamic era (i.e., 29 Ḏu'l-ḥejja 999/18 October 1591). Drastic decline was precipitated by the absence of prophetic guidance during this prolonged period. Yet this dismal epoch, in which Islam is weak and true Muslims few, will not be followed by the Day of Judgment, but rather by the revitalization of Islam through the efforts of the revivifier (*moǰadded*) of the millennium. He will be a man of perfect knowledge, fulfilling some tasks of the prophets of old and able to uplift the millenary period to such heights that any difference between it and the period of the Prophet will no longer be easily detectable (see, e.g., Serhendī, *Maktūbāt* III, pp. 173-74).

Serhendī apparently did not identify himself explicitly with the figure of the *moǰadded* in his own writings. Yet the *Maktūbāt* (especially III, pp. 145-46, 170-71) contain strong evidence that Serhendī ascribed to himself a very crucial role in reshaping the spiritual profile of his period. It seems clear that the action of the Indian Naqšbandīs, who conferred upon Serhendī the resounding title *moǰadded-e alf-e ṯānī* and described their suborder as Naqšbandīya Moǰaddedīya, was not entirely uninspired by their master.

A considerable part of the *Maktūbāt* is devoted to the analysis of pivotal concepts in the Islamic tradition. There are, for example, interesting discussions of the twin concepts of Islam and infidelity (*kofr*). Faithful to his overall approach, Serhendī treats these concepts on two different levels. On the lower, unmystical level, he makes the conventional Islamic distinction between belief and unbelief; this distinction is introduced, for instance, when Serhendī describes the disabilities which the infidel Hindus should endure in the Mughal empire. On the higher, mystical level, Islam and infidelity are not just *šaṛʿī* categories; they also constitute stages in the spiritual progress of the

Sufi along the path (*ṭarīqa*). The spiritual development of man is described in this context as commencing at the stage of infidelity in the conventional sense. It continues with the public profession of the Islamic creed (*eslām-e ṣūrat-e šarīʿat*); this formalist faith, from the mystic's point of view, is a rather low, contemptible stage, and all of Allāh's mercy is necessary to make this sort of Islam sufficient for salvation. Next comes "Sufi infidelity" (*kofr-e ṭarīqat*). Though the Sufi who reaches this stage at times affirms the seemingly blasphemous identity of God (*ḥaqq*) and His creation (*ḵalq*), he does not deserve punishment: He has reached this stage as a result of being intoxicated and overwhelmed with the love of God, so he disregards all distinctions and considers them as mere shadows of the all-embracing Unity. The ultimate stage on the mystical path is Sufi Islam (*eslām-e ṭarīqat*), which is attained only by the elect. The distinction between God and His creation regains its validity, and the person who is given the privilege of reaching this stage is again capable of attending to worldly matters. His experience of the Ultimate Reality makes him substantially better than those of his fellow Muslims who have never transcended the stage of formal, unmystical Islam (*Maktūbāt* II, pp. 166-68).

A somewhat similar description of mystical progress is given in Serhendī's discussion of prophecy (*nobūwa*) and sainthood (*walāya*). In contradistinction to the *kalām* literature and to Serhendī's own *Eṭbāt al-nobūwa*, prophecy as usually discussed in the *Maktūbāt* is not merely the mission of a person whom God sent to a people to warn them of their evil ways or to establish for them a new law; together with its sister concept of sainthood, it is an advanced stage in the Sufi's spiritual journey towards perfection. The stage of sainthood is characterized by mystical intoxication (*sokr*); at this stage the saint is immersed in his experience of the Ultimate Reality (*ḥaqq*) to the exclusion of everything else. The prophet also experiences intoxication with the Ultimate Reality at the peak of his spiritual ascent. He is, however, privileged to go beyond this stage: to return to sobriety (*ṣaḥw*) and to take social responsibilities, i.e., to concentrate upon his mission to his people. While prophecy is in this sense superior to sainthood, both are stages on the same spiritual path. Prophet and saint are privy to the same kind of knowledge. The difference between prophecy and other kinds of spiritual enlightenment is thus blurred to a considerable extent, and prophecy is transformed into an entirely Sufi concept. Prophets defined in this way never cease to exist, despite the Muslim belief that prophecy came to an end with the completion of Moḥammad's mission; the direct link with the Divine is permanently

preserved (*Maktūbāt* I, p. 291, II, pp. 66-67).

Other central concepts in the Islamic tradition are also affected by Serhendī's Sufi outlook. Even such a seemingly unmystical topic as the *šarīʿa* is sometimes given a distinctly Sufi character. It has form (*ṣūra*) and essence (*ḥaqīqa*), an outward aspect (*ẓāher*) and an inner aspect (*bāṭen*). Spiritually advanced persons, who grasp the essence of the *šarīʿa* as contained in the ambiguous verses of the Qurʾān (*motašābehāt*), will be much more amply rewarded in the hereafter than simpletons who are not capable of going beyond formal compliance with the Koranic injunctions. Even the difference between the *šaṛʿī* schools of law are dealt with in these terms. "In most legal matters in which differences of opinion exist between the Shafeʿite and the Hanafite schools, the outward and formal aspect is according to the Shafeʿite school, while the inner, essential aspect is in accordance with the Hanafite school" (Serhendī, *Mabdaʾ o maʿād*, Delhi, n.d., pp. 38-39).

The attitude towards the phenomenal world and the various degrees of mystical understanding of it are an important theme in the *Maktūbāt*. Like numerous others Sufis, Serhendī shows interest in the theories of the Unity of Being (*waḥdat al-wojūd*) and the Unity of Appearance (*waḥdat al-šohūd*). Unity of Appearance means "to see One; i.e., the Sufi sees nothing but One" (*tawḥīd-e šohūdī yakī dīdan ast yaʿnī šohūd-e sālek ǰoz bar yakī nabāšad*). But Unity of Being means "to know (but) One Being, to regard all else as non-existent, and to consider the manifestations of that (One) as one, despite their nonexistence" (*tawḥīd-e woǰūdī yak woǰūd dānestan va gāyr-e ū-rā maʿdūm angāštan va bā woǰūd-e ʿadamīyat maǰālī o maẓāher-e ān yakī pendāštan*). Serhendī exemplifies this distinction by describing two views of natural phenomena. A person might deny the existence of the stars while looking at the sun, because he is overwhelmed by the spectacle and cannot see anything except the sun itself; but his view is patently wrong. Similarly wrong is the *woǰūdī* who denies the existence of the phenomenal world because he cannot experience anything except the Ultimate Reality when reaching the pinnacle of his mystical journey. But the *šohūdī* knows that the stars (and the phenomenal world) do exist, though he also sees only the sun at the peak of his experience. Thus the *tawḥīd-e šohūdī* represents a more correct understanding of the relationship between the Creator and His creation. Though the existence of the world cannot be compared with the Existence of God, the world has been given enough stability and permanence (*ṯobūt o ṯabāt*) to allow for the Muslim idea of reward and punishment. In this exposition Serhendī sees himself as

adopting an intermediate position between the *ʿolamā'*, who maintain that the world really exists, and Ebn ʿArabī and his followers, who—in Serhendī's understanding—deny that the world has any existence at all.

It should not be surprising that Serhendī, steeped as he was in the Muslim mystical tradition, expressed favorable views of the early Sufis. He made a determined effort to retain within the fold of Islam even those Sufis who had been condemned because of their intemperate utterances concerning unity between God and man. Brushing aside obvious linguistic difficulties, he explained Ḥallāǰ's *ana'l-ḥaqq* and Besṭāmī's *sobḥānī* in a way compatible with accepted Muslim beliefs (*Maktūbāt* I, pp. 57-58, 314, II, pp. 5-6). Serhendī also showed great respect for Ebn ʿArabī. Though he criticized certain aspects of Ebn ʿArabī's teachings, Serhendī's rejection of Ebn ʿArabī was by no means as unequivocal as some modern writers have claimed it to be (I. H. Qureshi, *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent [610-l947]*, The Hague, 1962, p. 156; A. Ahmad, *Studies in the Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment*, Oxford, 1964, pp. 187-89).

It has been a near consensus of modern historians that Serhendī brought about major changes in the development of Islam in the Indian subcontinent. He is said to have reversed the heretical trends of the period of Akbar and to have inspired the orthodox reforms of Awrangzēb, whose main objective is thought to have been the imposition of the *šarīʿa* on the state. The *Maktūbāt* contain evidence to substantiate the notion that Serhendī tried to sway the Mughal empire in the direction of orthodoxy. In letters written to officials of the Mughal court, he demanded a decisive role for Islam in the state. He also recommended the reimposition of *ǰezya* on the Hindus and their humiliation in every possible way (*Muktūbāt* I, pp. 165-66, 169, 193). However, there is hardly any evidence for the too often advanced claim that his advice on these matters was heeded. We do not know how the recipients of his letters reacted to their contents; his imprisonment does not support the notion that the emperor was in any way under his influence. Jahāngīr certainly did not implement Serhendī's sweeping recommendations concerning the status of Hindus in the Mughal empire. It is noteworthy that in 17th century polemical literature Serhendī does not have the image of an orthodox reformer, but rather of an extravagant Sufi suffering from illusions of grandeur and highly disrespectful of the Prophet (Friedmann, *Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī*, pp. 7-10, 87ff.). This must have been the reason for which Awrangzēb proscribed his teachings and threatened to punish all those who propagated them (for the

text of the *farmān*, see ibid., p. 118). In the eyes of his contemporaries, and on the clear evidence of his writings, Serhendī was primarily a Sufi and must be assessed as such. His views supporting a decisive role for Islam in the state, which brought him fame (and opprobrium) due to their relevance to 20th century developments in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, were but a peripheral element in his thought.

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