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ʿERFĀN (1)

ʿERFĀN (lit., knowledge), Islamic theosophy. In its generic use, the term *ʿerfān* as describing Islamic "theosophy," is a broad and somewhat amorphous concept adopted by 20th century scholarship for intellectual developments that combine Sufi thought and Twelver Shiʿite philosophy. The modern use of the term (1) emphasizes the mystico-philosophical side of Sufism and Shiʿism, in contra-distinction to the organized practice of Sufism (*taṣawwof*) and to the rational speculation and legalistic reasoning of Shiʿite theology (*kalām*) and law (*feqh*); (2) it stresses the intuitive side of Islamic thought and wisdom (*ḥekma*), traced back to Šehāb-al-Dīn Yaḥyā Sohravardī and ʿEbn al-ʿArabī, as against the tradition of deductive philosophy (*falsafa*), associated with Ebn Rošd (d. 595/1198); (3) it seeks its roots in the *bāṭen*, the inner and hidden side of Islamic religiosity, that is understood, together with the generally more prominent, outer and manifest side (*ẓāher*) of Islamic law and religion, as shaping the totality of Islam. *ʿErfān* is commonly described by its adherents as a kind of monism, termed *waḥdat al-wojūd* (unity of existence) that, as expressed in a plethora of thought systems varying from author to author, unifies the divine and human realms in the common ground of absolute being, thereby leading the monotheistic creed of Islam (*tawḥīd*) to its ontological completion. (For a study of the vocabulary employed by *ʿerfān*, see Sajjādī).

The term *ʿerfān* itself had modest beginnings in the vocabulary of Islamic thought, never constituted a key term in the writings of medieval Islamic thinkers, yet succeeded in becoming a watchword for intellectual developments of modernity. The tendency of Islamic theosophy managed,

however, to assert itself in medieval times as a distinct trend of Islamic thought and today increasingly tends to be perceived as a conceptual antidote to Islamic fundamentalism. Like theosophical trends in other religions, *ʿerfān* emphasizes mystical experience, esoteric doctrine, and monist philosophy. Yet owing to its strong inner bonds with Islamic law and religious practice, it deemphasizes the occult and magical phenomena, which are often associated with theosophy. Because of the strong philosophical underpinnings of Islamic theosophy it appears less fortuitous to translate *ʿerfān* with esotericism or gnosis, terms which express a wide variety of esoteric and gnostic trends in Islam. Although there are similarities between *ʿerfān* and the many variations of the Hellenistic tradition of gnosis (see Blochet), what is understood by Islamic theosophy today can be sufficiently explained through inner-Islamic developments without recourse to a hypothesis of substantial borrowings from other religious traditions.

The Arabic word *ʿerfān*, like *maʿrefa*, a noun derived from the verb *ʿarafa*, denotes knowledge or cognition. It is frequently understood as synonymous with *ʿelm*, the general term for "knowledge," and is also seen as closely related to both *edrāk*, the act of perception, and *ḏawq*, the inner "taste" or direct experience of the knowledge that has been received. Distinguished from *ʿelm* and *maʿrefa, ʿerfān* emphasizes the subjective side of knowledge, the act of recognition which provides the human knower with knowledge (*ʿelm*) that is ultimately understood as a gift of God (*maʿrefa*, pl. *maʿāref*). *ʿErfān* denotes the human, not the divine act of knowing, because when described by the attribute of knower, God is called *ʿālem* rather than *ʿāref*, a term reserved for the human being. The most fundamental act of *ʿerfān* is the knowing of God who, however, can only be known if He makes Himself manifest, be it through His attributes displayed in the world of creation, the revelation of His word in scripture, or His immediate presence in the heart and mind of the human being. Seen in this perspective, *ʿerfān* implies the self-manifestation of God in each act of knowing, thereby giving the human knower insight into the true nature of the things that become the object of human knowledge.

Islamic theosophy traces its roots to select verses of the Qurʾān and privileged statements of Hadith. The interpretation of the key verse 7:172 (*alasto be-rabbekom, qālū balā šāhednā*) places the first act of human knowing at the dawn of creation. On the Day of Covenant (*yawm al-mīṯāq*) in pre-existence the human race gave witness to its recognition of Allāh as the one Lord. This first act of the human intellect constitutes the first realization of self-consciousness

on the part of the human being. The intimate link of human self-awareness with knowledge of God came to be expressed by the famous Hadith statement, *man ʿarafa nafsaho faqad ʿarafa rabbaho* (who knows himself knows his Lord), an assertion that discovers the certain and direct knowledge of God in the very act of one's self-consciousness without requiring rational proof for God's existence. Although the term *ʿerfān* does not occur in the Qurʾān, it is sometimes perceived as the quality of "those anchored in knowledge" (*al-rāseḵūn fi'l-ʿelm*, 3:7, 4:162) and the mark of the righteous (*al-ṣeddīqūn*, 57:19; 4:69), whose prototypes are found among holy men and women of the Qurʾān (Ebrāhīm 19:41; Edrīs 19:56; Yūsof 12:46; Maryam 5:75). One *ḥadīṯ qodsī*, frequently cited by proponents of *ʿerfān*, "I was a hidden treasure (*konto kanzan maḵfīan)*, and I wanted to be known, so I created the world," finds the origin for the existence of human knowledge in God who, in eternal loneliness, desired to be known. Another, "Heaven and earth contain Me not, but the heart of my faithful servant contains Me (*waseʿanī qalbo ʿabdī al-moʾmen*)" singles out the human heart as the locus where God's knowledge reaches completion (cf. Forūzānfar, nos. 63, 70, 529).

Islamic theosophy pursues knowledge that is hidden (*bāṭen*), either in the sense that is not within the reach of ordinary people or that it escapes the grasp of the senses. The extreme Shiʿites (*ḡolāt*; q.v.) of Kufa held views that distinguished the eternal, hidden (*bāṭen*) from the outer, visible reality of God and the eternal core of the human being (*al-jozʾ al-elāhī*, divine element) from his physical and terrestrial form (Halm, pp. 7-232). The insight into the inner (*bāṭen*) meaning of Qurʾān and *šarīʿa*, as distinct from their outer, literal meaning, an insight expressed by allegorical interpretation (*taʾwīl*), was claimed as a privilege of the imams, whose knowledge of the unseen (*ḡayb*), understood by the Twelvers as hereditary knowledge (*ʿelm erṯī*), included suprasensory knowledge of the true nature of things and of the certain occurrence of future events. The early Sufis of Baṣra, on the other hand, because they understood the inmost being (*serr al-nafs*) of the human person as the seat of the *bāṭen*, felt that it could be reached by anyone prepared to purify the soul through mental and ascetic discipline (Böwering, 1980, pp. 185-201). God would grant illumination (*mokāšafa*) to a human soul whose mirror had been thus purified and polished (*taṣqīl*), empowering it to perceive and elicit the true inner meaning of Qurʾān and Sonna through a method of anagogical interpretation sometimes termed fathoming (*estenbāt*Â).

For the purpose of defining the parameters of *ʿerfān*, it is not helpful to

exaggerate certain affinities between *ʿerfān* and Ismaʿili thought, traced by Louis Massignon (pp. 55-77) on the basis of Wladimir Ivanow's edition of the *Omm al-ketāb* and further elaborated by Henry Corbin's search for clusters of esoteric motifs (1983, pp. 151-193). By its very nature as a secret teaching conveyed through initiation, Ismaʿili thought, the teaching (*taʿlīm*) of the Bāṭenīya, was limited to an intellectual and sectarian elite. It also went hand in hand with a political agenda of revolution against existing de-facto structures of Islamic rule. Although these features of secret initiation and political revolution are also present in 20th century *ʿerfān*, there is insufficient evidence for their direct historical dependence on Ismaʿilism. To be sure, there are similarities between *ʿerfān* and Ismaʿili thinkers, e.g., the Qarāmeṭa authors of the philosophical system of the Eḵwān-al-Ṣafāʾ or the Fātimid thinkers such as Ḥamīd-al-Dīn Aḥmad Kermānī (d. 411/1021). The underpinnings for the metaphysical, logical and cosmological categories adopted by *ʿerfān*, however, seem to be strongly indebted to classical Islamic philosophers, such as Abū Naṣr Fārābī (d. 339/950), Abu'l-Ḥasan ʿĀmerī (d. 381/992) and Ebn Sīnā (d. 428/1037), especially with regard to the concepts of being (*wojūd*) and intellect (*ʿaql*), the threefold distinction between the impossible, possible, and necessary, the Ptolemaic structure of the universe in spheres, and the Plotinian scheme of the many brought forth from the One through the instrumentality of angels (Nasr, pp. 9-51).

Reflecting on the preceding generations of Sufi masters and the earlier age of the ancient sages who had developed a mystical tradition of philosophy, Yaḥyā Sohravardī (executed in Aleppo in 587/1191) traced a wisdom tradition (*al-ḥekma al-ʿatīqa)*, dubbed the pre-eternal leaven (*al-ḵamīra al-azalīya*), back to Aristotle, the guide of wisdom (*emām al-ḥekma*), and other ancient thinkers such as Plato and Plotinus. Sohravardī posited the source of his own philosophy in the confluence of the two principal strands of this wisdom tradition originating with Hermes: the Greek, transmitted through Pythagoras and revived by the Sufis Ḏu'l-Nūn Meṣrī and Sahl Tostarī, and the Persian, transmitted through Kayḵosrow and revived by the Sufis Bāyazīd Besṭāmī, Ḥallāj, and Abu'l-Ḥasan Ḵaraqānī (qq.v.; I. *al-Maṣāreʿ wa'l-moṭāraḥāt*, pp. 502-3; II, *Ḥekmat al-ešrāq*, p. 255; III. *Majmūʿāt-e āṯār-e fārsī*, p. 76). Sohravardī's philosophy of illumination (*ešrāq*) regards being and knowledge as irradiations of the pure light rising in the east, a light to which the human being, with his entire soul, should turn as the source of all reality and the clarity that illuminates all objects of human knowledge (Corbin, 1971-72, II, pp. 9-257).

Formulating his insights on the nature of being in his *Foṣūṣ al-ḥekam* and *al-Fotūḥāt al-makkīya*, Ebn al-ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) taught that all existence is one and that the existence of created things is nothing but a reflection of the Creator's existence. God and creation are two aspects of one reality, reflecting each other and depending on each other. In His eternal loneliness, the Absolute longed for manifestation and brought forth the universe by an emanation of His very being that crystallized, through the medium of archetypes, to form the manifold world of creation. All things emanate from God, in whose mind they are preexistent as ideas, and evolve in stages to form the world of multiplicity. From this world of multiplicity the human souls ascend to God, being reunited with the divine world and again sent forth into the lower world with newly obtained divine knowledge. God and world are like two opposing mirror images beholding each other. The light of Moḥammad, a type of logos, is the point where the two opposites touch each other to form the universal human being. This ontological figure is represented by the perfect human being on earth (see ENSĀN-e KĀMEL), himself an outward manifestation of the image of the human being conceived in the divine mind. Ebn al-ʿArabī's theory transformed the early Sufis' psychological experience of mystical union into an ontological speculation on the unity of being, propelling the idea of *tawḥīd* to a dynamic conclusion (Böwering, 1994, pp. 74-75). The object of intense commentary within the circle of his many followers (Chittick, pp. 107-28), the teachings of Ebn al-ʿArabī were disseminated and often streamlined by his interpreters (cf. Morris, 1986 and 1987), among whom Maḥmūd Qayṣarī (d. 751/1350) produced an influential work for the later developments of *ʿerfān* with his *Šarḥ foṣūṣ al-ḥekam*.

To Ḥaydar Āmolī (d. after 787/1385), a Twelver Shiʿīte who espoused Sufism and settled at Najaf, belongs the distinction of having forged a synthesis between Sufi and Shiʿite thought by amalgamating Shiʿite doctrine with core ideas of Ebn al-ʿArabī, on whose *Fūṣūṣ al-ḥekam* he wrote a long erudite commentary (cf. *al-Moqaddemāt men Ketāb naṣṣ al-noṣūsá*). Seeing the imams as the guides of all Muslims (not only the Shiʿites) who seek the mystical path, Āmolī taught a monism, termed ontological monotheism (*tawḥīd wojūdī*), that would be vindicated with the return of the Twelfth Imam as the *mahdī* and seal of the particular Mohammadan *walāya* (cycle of sainthood). This monism, illustrated by Āmolī's image of the letters and the ink, described the objects of the physical world as mere loci of divine manifestation (*maẓāher*), just like the ink makes letters appear that are devoid of independent existence. There is

nothing in existence except God (*laysa fi'l-wojūd sewā Allāh*); the universe and all it includes are but the sum total of the divine names, attributes and acts made manifest (1968, passim).

ʿErfān reached its climax during Safavid times in the theosophical school of Isfahan with Mīr(-e) Dāmād (d. 1040/1630) and Ṣadr-al-Dīn Šīrāzī, known as Mollā Ṣadrā (d. 1050/1640). Mīr Dāmād, the "third teacher" after Aristotle and Fārābī, wielded great influence at the Safavid court and achieved a remarkable synthesis between Twelver Shiʿite doctrines, Islamic metaphysics elaborated by Fārabī and Ebn Sīnā, and Sohravardī's illuminative wisdom. He perceived in mystical vision (*kašf*), based on divine revelation (*šarʿ*) and confirmed by human intelligence (*ʿaql*), the privileged way to the ultimate truth which unveils the origin (*mabdaʾ*) of human selfhood and shows the goal (*maʿād*) of human destiny, the alpha and omega of divine wisdom, *ḥekmat-e elāhī* (Corbin, 1971-72, IV pp. 9-53).

Mollā Ṣadrā, Mīr Dāmād's student who taught in Shiraz, eventually outshone his master with his *al-Ḥekmat al-motaʿālīya fi'l-asfār al-arbaʿ al-ʿaqlīya* (Tehran, 1282/1865), perhaps the most crucial work on *ʿerfān*. In this "transcendent" philosophy (cf. Rahman, pp. 27-265), Mollā Ṣadrā merged the Twelver Shiʿite notion of the fourteen pure souls (Moḥammad, Fāṭema and the twelve imams) with the active intelligences of Ebn Sīnā's cosmology as ontological archetypes of existence; maintained the existence of an independent world of images (*ʿālam al-meṯāl*) between the intelligible world and the sensible world; advocated the primacy of being (*wojūd*) over quiddity (*māhīya*) as the foundation of metaphysics; and defended the soul as the eternal essence of individuality while asserting that anything that exists is susceptible to change and perfection (Morris, 1981, pp. 60-85). Using the paradigm of the four journeys (*asfār*) and discussing major metaphysical questions, such as the divine attributes, the creation *ex nihilo*, prophetical knowledge and the immortality of the soul, Molla Ṣadrā envisioned human cognition penetrating the Absolute to such an extent that the theosopher ultimately subsists in and returns from God to guide humanity (*Ketāb al-mašāʿer*, Corbin's intro., pp. 1-86).

Mollā Ṣadrā's views were spread by his disciples ʿAbd-al-Razzāq Lahījī (d. 1072/1661) and Moḥsen-e Fayż Kāšānī (d. 1091/1680) and widely attacked as heresy (*bedʿa*) by his enemies of the Ḥella school (for a survey of philosophers following Mollā Ṣadrā's speculation until ʿAbd-al-Raḥīm Damāvandī [d. 1170/1757], see Corbin, 1981). The teachings of Mollā Hādī Sabzavārī (d.

1298/1878) revived the teachings of Mollā Ṣadrā in the Qajar period (Izutsu, pp. 57-149), while Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Ṭabāṭabāʾī succeeded after World War II in having *ʿerfān* introduced as a subject into the syllabus of the major Shiʿite seminary at Qom. The tradition of *ʿerfān* transmission and the secret bond thereby established between master and disciple have created discreet networks of ties among Persian mullas, bonds that can easily coexist in an individual with political revolution and a fundamentalist outlook on Islam. Ayatollah Rūḥ-Allāh Ḵomeynī (d. 1989) himself became a noted teacher of *ʿerfān* in Qom until 1963, when he was drawn increasingly into political activities against the Shah (cf. Knysh, pp. 631-53). The 20th century scholars, Henry Corbin, Jalāl-al-Dīn Āštīānī and Sayyed Ḥosayn Naṣr, wedded to *ʿerfān* by scholarly interest and personal commitment, have produced numerous valuable editions and translations of the Arabic and Persian primary sources of Islamic theosophy, and have popularized the teachings of *ʿerfān* in Persia and the West.

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