TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

Islamic Tradition of Spiritual Guidance, II

IN AN EARLIER LOOK at the Islamic tradition, Paul Jackson sketched out the development of the theory and practice of spiritual guidance. Against that backdrop he then treated at somewhat greater length the life and works of Sharafuddin Maneri, one of the major figures in the history of South Asian Islamic spirituality.

To provide a slightly different perspective on this vast subject, I propose to give a brief survey of some of the principal kinds of *sources* of the tradition and of prominent *themes* in Islamic spiritual guidance, and then take a closer look at a contemporary of Maneri's from the opposite (western) end of the medieval Islamic world. Ibn 'Abbad of Ronda also lived in the fourteenth century (1330-90) and wrote important letters of spiritual direction. But unlike Maneri, Ibn 'Abbad was born in Spain and lived most of his life in Morocco, wrote his letters in Arabic rather than in Persian, and belonged to a religious order whose 'charism' contributed towards the development of a kind of 'lay spirituality'.

Sources

Across the length and breadth of Maneri and Ibn 'Abbad's world, Muslim spiritual writers developed the tradition of spiritual guidance through a variety of literary forms. Many variations on the theme occur in such indirect types of spiritual counsel as one finds in the sapiential anecdotes of Persian storytellers and mystical poets, or in occasional exegetical works where a text prompts the interpreter to expound on some technical term of particular significance in Islamic spirituality. It will suit our purpose here to mention only four types of literature: manuals, conversations of the shaykhs, treatises on proper conduct and letters of spiritual direction.

From around the tenth century, compendia or manuals on the major themes and requirements of the Sufi Path (the mystical dimension of Islam, understood in a general way) began to appear. These often lengthy treatises functioned partly as biographical dictionaries, many including explicitly a 'Who's Who Among Sufis' segment, and partly as lexica of the technical terminology and theory requisite for an adequate understanding of the Path. Some also included sections specifically devoted to advising the novice or 'seeker' as to conduct expected of him in relation to the spiritual guide (the shaykh).[1]

A second literary genre developed from collections of discourses and *obiter dicta* of the more famous and revered guides. Such sayings recorded by disciples (a type known as *malfuz*, to which Paul Jackson referred in his discussion of Maneri), had in most instances the added authority of directives or advice from one's own shaykh or a major figure in one's own religious order. In any case, the form intentionally preserved the exemplary reflections of some shaykh for the emulation of seekers, although the content rarely followed the organizational structure of a formal treatise.[2]

Combining the more direct authority of a particular guide's instructions to a specific group of seekers along with the order of topics found in the treatise or manual form, spiritual writers developed a third genre. Books of *Adab* contain the shaykh's directives on a variety of matters of external behaviour, such as garb, conversation, eating, travelling and companionship. Even though these generally small documents emphasize especially the seeker's outward deportment, they do so in the belief that the outer and the inner condition are inseparable: behaviour both expresses one's attitude and helps to mould and transform one interiorly by subtly modifying one's inner disposition.[3]

Still more direct and more personal, correspondence from a shaykh to a particular seeker constitutes the last important form of spiritual guidance. In their letters the guides address, of course, the more predictable 'generic' issues, such as the use of various traditional methods of prayer, spiritual reading, fasting and pilgrimage. Beyond that, however, this more personal vehicle for guidance affords us a glimpse into numerous individual matters of conscience and religious experience. Topics range from scruples over the acceptance of stipends for instructing children in the faith, to confusion over the absence of sensible consolation while reciting scripture, to the perennial question of how to find a suitable spiritual director.[4]

Themes in Islamic spiritual guidance

Muslim spiritual writers regard the need of a spiritual guide as of paramount importance, analogous to humanity's need of a prophet to reveal God's word. Even Moses had to apprentice to his father-in-law (Shu'ayb, a prophet in Islamic tradition) as preparation for encountering God. The ordinary wayfarer faces far too many perils on the path to hazard the journey alone. On the other hand, one cannot simply designate one's own shaykh; God grants guidance as a gift.

Qualifications of the guide form a second theme. Virtually every document on spiritual guidance mentions these in greater or lesser detail. Najm ad-Din Daya Razi (d. 1256) wrote one of the more extensive treatises on the subject. His *Path of God's bondsmen*, based in part on similar work by earlier writers, lists the following attributes of the

authentic guide: servitude to God alone, reception of truth directly from God, privileged access to God's mercy, a heart purified of all non-divine forms of knowledge, rebirth into knowledge of the essence of God's presence. Other attributes that follow are correct belief, intelligence, liberality, courage, chastity, lofty aspiration, compassion, forbearance, forgiveness, sweet temper, selflessness, contentment with one's lot, dignity, tranquillity, steadfastness and a presence worthy of reverence.[5]

Razi's subsequent chapter outlines the third theme, that of the behaviour (*adab*) required of the seeker or novice. In order to fan the spark God 'strikes from flint' within the individual, the seeker must willingly submit to the tutelage of the guide. Razi enumerates twenty essential qualities: repentance, renunciation, abandonment of family ties, proper belief, fear of God, patience, struggle against the lower self (the 'greater struggle' [*jihad*] as compared to struggle against external foes), courage, readiness to sacrifice, chivalrousness, sincerity, knowledge, active searching, willingness to suffer reproach without giving occasion for it, intelligence, even disposition, submission to the shaykh 'as a corpse in the hands of the corpse washer', and utter abandonment to God. Of course, Razi does not expect such lofty accomplishment of a beginner; only an awareness that the path makes severe demands.[6]

Given a guide and a seeker capable of high aspiration, the relationship of spiritual guidance may advance to the task of assessing the seeker's inner needs and naming God's manner of dealing with this unique individual. One might characterize the essence of the relationship in terms of one overarching concern and four subordinate themes, and still stop just short of unhelpful entanglement in the wonderfully complex and centuries-old unfolding of Islamic spiritual anthropology. Above all the seeker must appreciate humanity's absolute need of God and God's absolute willingness to fill that need by providing all necessities for the journey. However, not all 'provisions' available will prove equally beneficial for a given individual; some the seeker must learn to reject so as to move on.

Within that context, the analysis of the interior life turns upon a discernment of four aspects of the inner 'provisions' that present themselves. The shaykh helps the seeker through a heightened awareness of the immediate source, duration, content and affective tone of the more critical provisions that take the form of 'movements of soul'.

A 'negative psychic force'[7] implanted at creation renders the process exceedingly difficult: the lower self of each person threatens constantly to roil the waters for its own selfish ends and to insure that it need not stir from its bed of torpor. Though Muslim writers differ as to the precise enumeration of the sources of crucial interior movements, the lower self (*nafs*) figures prominently in all their analyses. *Nafs* can generate its own movements. Other immediate sources authors list variously as God,

Satan, a good angel, reason, certitude, the spirit, the 'world' and so forth.[8]

Taking note of a given movement's duration allows the guide to specify more minutely the experience's valence. Some types occur only momentarily and in rapid succession. Others perdure and, once fended off if necessary, continue to badger the seeker and cause inner turmoil and anxiety. Still others, of a more welcome sort, remain but make their presence felt very subtly, like an ant crawling across a black stone in the dead of night.

In the case of those movements from God that occur briefly and in succession, authorities on the subject express various opinions as to whether one ought to attend to the first or to the second suggestion, or whether both are of equal cogency since both come ultimately from God. Finally, a movement's duration can serve to indicate its source. For example, divinely given thoughts stay but momentarily so that one must pay keen attention. Satanic whisperings assault, withdraw and renew the attack. Notions originating in the lower self tend to linger, while the lower self rationalizes and procrastinates, until some desire finds satisfaction.

Content varies considerably, of course, among the several types of inner movement. Satanic 'whisperings' generally propose to the lower self some sort of congenial ease or comfort, for the lower self naturally loathes effort (its nemesis is the 'greater struggle'). Immediately from the lower self come desires for a host of physical satisfactions, honour, fame, wealth, revenge and the like. Divine intimations invariably announce themselves as such by their obvious congruence with the revealed Law, and by the recipient's fierce resistance to them. Some types of suggestion can carry a message either laudable or censurable in content. In those cases, one must judge the movement's value by the other criteria.

Some levels of religious experience seem closely related to the individual's effort and striving and appear to perdure, so that one could characterize them as 'plateaus'. Muslim authors have named these 'stations'. Many inner experiences, however, will not yield to purely discursive analysis, nor do they come and go merely because the subject wills it so. Muslim writers' interest in the affective tone of such experiences evolved into detailed inventories of other experiences at once more emotionally charged and fleeting, and appearing to have their origin in God rather than in human effort. These they have called 'states'. They include, for example, experiences of desire, longing, contentment and non-discursive intimate knowledge.

Whereas the 'stations' (*magamat*, pl. of *magam*) typically trace the itinerary of one who labours through the 'purgative' way of *mujahada* (striving), the 'states' (*ahwal*, pl. of *hal*) form a map of the journey through the 'illuminative' way of *mukashafa* (contemplative vision). Ideally,

the distinction serves to facilitate analysis; one must not take it too literally as a clear divide between effort and grace.

With some background on the sources and themes central to the Islamic tradition of spiritual guidance as a whole, one might more readily assess the role of one classic practitioner of the art.

Ibn 'Abbad of Ronda as spiritual guide

Born in the south Iberian hill town of Ronda, about sixty miles from Gibraltar, Ibn 'Abbad migrated as a boy of seven to Morocco, there to spend his life. The Marinid Dynasty ruled his world, more tentatively perhaps than the average citizen would have liked. Social, economic and political conditions of his day did not fill Ibn 'Abbad with confidence in the present or hope for the future; but the need for religious reform he regarded as of the highest priority, for upon the renewal of faith all else rested. So long as in a solitary heart a single grain of faith remained, all was not lost.

To the nurturing of that faith in individual persons Ibn 'Abbad devoted considerable time and effort. His fifty-four extant letters constitute only a portion of his total written work. With some 'commentary' of a slightly more technical nature from his other writings, one can summarize the major concerns of this spiritual guide.

Central issues in the spiritual life

In the individual person, the death of faith goes hand in hand with egocentrism or presumptuousness. On a larger scale, that same pretentiousness results in the fragmentation of society and undermines religious community. As a subtle form of idolatry ('hidden *shirk*', 'setting up a partner with God') egocentricity takes countless forms: false humility, fear of death, acts of piety for the sake of display and a thousand other ways of clinging to one's own deeds as a source of ultimate security. The seeker must strive to counteract the tendency to egocentricity through the attitudes of 'servanthood' or 'worshipfulness', and gratitude, which in turn arise from an awareness of one's radical insufficiency and neediness.

Authentic self-knowledge alone can keep the seeker free from the anguish of scruples and the delusion of false asceticism. Excessive austerity or undue grief over one's failures merely masks otherwise naked egocentricity. Genuine asceticism poses the never-ending challenge of discerning how God reveals himself to the seeker at this very moment, regardless of how strongly the seeker feels he 'ought' to break out and move to some other spiritual state. God works here and now, and attentiveness to that presence requires a lifetime of discipline.

Ibn 'Abbad counsels his directees to regard the 'greater struggle' of the purgative way as the other side of the coin from the 'contemplative vision' of the illuminative way. Between masochism and hedonism the

path winds. Debilitating anxiety, self-doubt, ennui, fear of abandonment and the like signal the victory of egocentrism as surely as does the unbridled search for pleasure. The greater struggle means never surrendering oneself to either stasis, while contemplative vision allows the individual to perceive God's utter transcendence and incomparable majesty in the very midst of personal and cosmic poverty and neediness. Contemplative vision both presupposes and reinforces the greater struggle's challenge to the aspirant to become a 'child of this moment'.

The role of the spiritual guide

Ibn 'Abbad expresses considerable concern over how the seeker can find guidance for the journey. During his time the emphasis in the study of religious law seems to have shifted from personal contact with an acknowledged authority to the study of secondary works. Apparently under the influence of that trend, the use of classic writings in Sufism seems similarly to have taken precedence over individual guidance. One could claim as spiritual master (or as license-granting authority in religious law) any author whose works he had read. Ibn 'Abbad himself considers as his 'masters of initiation' in the Sufi Path the authors of the classic works through which he first became acquainted with the Path. Even when he was a disciple of the stern master Ibn 'Ashir, he maintained his independence.

On the whole, Ibn 'Abbad's approach to the role of the spiritual guide strikes one as quite balanced. He examines thoroughly in one of his Letters (Letter XVI in *Letters on the Sufi Path*) the question of whether a seeker absolutely needs a living guide. He concludes that one does not simply attach oneself to the right shaykh. God alone can provide the gift of a truly sagacious director. God decides whether and when the seeker will find personal guidance. One ought therefore neither expend too much effort searching, nor simply despair of ever finding a guide, but merely be prepared for the gift should it be granted.

God ultimately guides the heart with his light. In other words, direction occurs from within the individual seeker. Ibn 'Abbad acknowledges the already ancient tradition that God guides individuals generally in either of two ways. Some God leads along a predominantly active, purgative way. Through long periods of discipline and discursive meditation, God leads the 'wayfarer' (*salik*) upward, from the effects of the divine action in the world, to an awareness of God's names, to the contemplation of the divine attributes and finally to the divine essence. Others God guides along a predominantly passive or illuminative path. The 'attracted' or 'drawn' seeker (*majdhub*) advances as though whisked along from an experience of God's essence to an awareness of all creatures as existing 'in God'. In other words, the first type sees God in creation; the second, creation in God.

From the psychological point of view, guidance involves helping a seeker to discern the variety of guises under which the lower self, the 'world' and the Devil present themselves. A healthy individual knows the arduousness of self-mastery. Theologically speaking, guidance aims at gratitude to God and acknowledgement of one's poverty. Through gratitude of the heart, one acknowledges God as source of all goods. Through gratitude of the tongue, one sings God's praises. Through gratitude of all the senses, one engages in good works and thus brings a communitarian dimension to one's spiritual life.

Ibn 'Abbad inherited a highly sophisticated spiritual anthropology, including an ample lexicon of finely nuanced concepts keyed to the subtleties of personal religious experience. In addition to the range of 'stations' and 'states' mentioned earlier, Ibn 'Abbad pays special attention to the experiences of 'contraction' and 'expansion' (*qabd* and *bast*), terms that one could also translate loosely as 'desolation' and 'consolation'. Following the lead of his spiritual ancestor Ibn 'Ata Allah, Ibn 'Abbad believes that expansion can be more dangerous than contraction, for the former might encourage the novice to think he has brought this pleasant state upon himself. A seeker could forget that God effects all such conditions.

Contraction and expansion appear rather as qualities that broadly characterize a variety of experiences than as experiences in themselves, although one could conceivably be aware of contraction or expansion without further qualification. Hope and expansion, fear and contraction often occur as pairs. In any case, the spiritual guide strives to teach the seeker, first, awareness of the inner succession of stations and states, and second, how to intepret them as indicators of how God has chosen to work in the seeker at a given moment.

About the nature of the relationship between shaykh and aspirant, Ibn 'Abbad has several important things to say. The shaykh must treat the seeker like a son; the seeker, in turn, must practice docility, concealing nothing. Avoiding authoritarianism at all cost, the guide works to understand what the disciple has said before rendering an opinion. Ibn 'Abbad knew of two types of shaykh. Seekers who needed basic character formation and schooling in the requirements of the revealed Law and the Sufi Path would do better with an 'instructing' shaykh. One could even enlist the services of several such guides simultaneously.

An 'educating' shaykh, on the other hand, taught by example and personal association rather than by more conventional pedagogical methods. This latter type of guide would teach a seeker already thus tutored in the basics of the tradition his personal and private invocation (*dhikr*, a mantra-like word or phrase intended to address a particular disciple's unique needs), lead him through the retreat of forty days (*chilla*), regulate his daily order (sleeping, eating, times of silence and so forth),

and prescribe specific disciplinary activities. A seeker could associate with only one educating shaykh at a time. In Ibn 'Abbad's estimation, a seeker could make more rapid progress under a shaykh whom God has 'drawn' than under a 'wayfarer'.

Ibn 'Abbad's letters indicate that subject matter for spiritual direction could include virtually anything in the seeker's experience that he perceived as relating in any way with his relationship with God. Significant material thus encompassed experiences of success or failure, clarity or bewilderment, grief or elation, hope or fear, love or hate. If a correspondent expressed a powerful desire to move out of his present state, Ibn 'Abbad encouraged him to stay with it until he appreciated how that state, however distasteful, could speak a word from the Lord. The seeker needs, in short, to learn to trust his experience, and fend off the temptation to worry that he 'should' be experiencing something else.

Personal growth is perhaps the most important criterion for judging the success of the relationship of director to directee. Among the various touchstones Ibn 'Abbad used to assess growth, he regarded the broad categories of 'proper demeanour' (*husn al-adab*) and 'thinking well' of God (*husn az-zann*) as the crucial indices. Here one inevitably manifested the fruits or lack of the fundamental value of gratitude (which functioned for Ibn 'Abbad much the way love does in Christian thought), and the total approach to life that he calls 'contemplative vision'. The clearer that vision, the greater the gratitude and the smaller the danger of egocentricity. Ultimately, spiritual maturity appears in the ability to 'think well of God', that is, always allowing the Creator the benefit of the doubt and refusing to wallow in the conviction that one has God down to a predictable pattern.

Finally, Ibn 'Abbad exhibited pre-eminently the spiritual guide's virtue *sine qua non*: reticence about his qualifications as a spiritual guide. He did not consider himself an authority on matters spiritual or relating to religious law. Neither did he protest too much; only enough to leave the modern reader convinced that Ibn 'Abbad must have been an excellent spiritual guide.

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NOTES

[1] Good translations of this type are: Razi, Najm ad-Din Daya, *The path of God's bondsmen*, trans Hamid Algar (New York: Caravan, 1982); Hujwiri, *The Kashf al-Mahjub*, trans R. A. Nicholson (London: Luzac, 1976).

[2] See for example, A. J. Arberry's translation of *Discourses of Rumi* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1972), and Paul Jackson's translation of Maneri's discourses, *Khwan-i Pur Ni'mat: a table laden with good things* (Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 1986).

[3] See for example Ibn al-'Arabi's 'Instructions to a postulant', translated by A. Jeffrey in his edition of primary source translations, *A reader on Islam* (The Hague: Mouton, 1962); M. Milson's translation of Abu Najib Suhrawardi's *Kitab Adab al-Muridin*, entitled in English *A Sufi rule for novices* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1975); and G. Boewering's translation of Ansari's short treatise, along with a brief survey of the genre, in 'The *Adab* literature of classical Sufism: Ansari's code of conduct', in Barbara Metcalf, ed., *Moral conduct and authority: the place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp 62–87.

[4] See Paul Jackson's translation of Maneri's *The hundred Letters* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980); A. H. Abdel Kader, trans, *The life personality and writings of al-Junayd* (London: Luzac, 1976); Shaykh al-'Arabi Darqawi, *Letters of a Sufi master*, trans Titus Burckhardt (London: Perennial Books, 1969); and Ibn 'Abbad of Ronda's *Letters on the Sufi Path*, a translation of sixteen letters, with an extensive introduction on themes and setting of Ibn 'Abbad's spirituality, by John Renard (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1986).

[5] Razi, *op. cit.*, pp 243–254.

[6] *Ibid.* pp 255–267.

[7] Boewering G.: *The mystical vision of existence in classical Islam* (Berlin: deGruyter, 1980), p 253.

[8] For excellent analysis of these and related issues see Peter Awn's *Satan's tragedy and redemption: Iblis in Sufi psychology* (Leiden: Brill, 1983), esp. pp 64ff.