

FREEMASONRY AND THE SUFIS

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The first time I heard the word "Sufi" was in my early youth when, like most of my generation, we eagerly gulped the heady language of the quatrains of Omar Khayyam. To us they were like a torch lighting up dark places. We read the Rubaiyat so often that we knew it by heart and even now I could repeat a large part of it.

In quatrain 55 Fitzgerald's translation reads:

The vine had struck a Fibre which about
It clings my being - let the Sufi flout;
Of my base metal may be filed a key
That shall unlock the Door he howls without.

[Omar Khayyam was born at Naisaburg in the latter half of 11th c. & died within the 1st quarter of 12th c. Entombed (i.e. 1150-1125) approx.]

(from 1st ed. in 1859)
" 2nd " " 1889 = stanza 76.

It seems from this that Omar is deriding the Sufi, but Omar was in fact a very honoured Sufi himself, a teacher as well as a poet. The Sufis say that Fitzgerald was confused and did not understand Omar's special teaching technique and that the original quatrain does not say "let the Sufi flout".

If we thought about the Sufis at all in those days we thought of them as a sect of Islam. It was many years before we learnt what the Sufis really were.

The word "Sufi" itself became current about a thousand years ago. Some authors suggest that it is derived from the Arabic word for wool, referring to the material from which the simple robes of the early Muslim mystics were made. But the Sufis themselves do not accept this - they say that the word has no etymology.

I think it would be as well first to say what the Sufis are not. They are not a sect, a cult, or part of a religion. They permeate all religions and there are Sufi Christians as well as Moslems. There are Sufi societies but the Sufis have no headquarters and no permanent organisation. They are fluid, and their methods change according to time and place, yet Sufism remains what it has always been - a method of attaining higher knowledge and a higher state of being, a bringing out of the higher powers which are latent in everyone.

The origins of the Sufis go back a thousand years but between the tenth and fifteenth centuries A.D. much of the inhabited world was shattered by hordes of Goths and Tartars, Turks and Mongols from Central Asia, who spread over the decaying Empires of China, India, Baghdad, Byzantium and Rome and uprooted the ancient cultures and brought chaos over much of the world. Near the centre of the convulsion, in the lands through which flowed the Oxus river, there appeared a society or brotherhood of wise men who played a vital part in bringing order into the distress caused by so much massacre and the destruction of so many cities and cultures. They were known as the Masters of Wisdom and the Keepers of the Traditions of the Sufis.

* - But see "Living Religions of the World" by Prof. Frederic Spiegelberg (1954)
*2 like Islam it is a "portable" religion (ibid)

From then there has been an unbroken stream of Sufi masters, whose names and works are known and they continue unto this day. Over the centuries the Sufis claim to have worked and left traces in a great range of human activities. These include philosophy, Christian mysticism, Moslem mysticism, psychology, legends such as that of William Tell, the stories of Hans Andersen, Zen, Yoga, Knights Templars, St. John of the Cross, Roger Bacon and many others. If they set up an activity which becomes concentrated in a community they do so, however, only for a limited time and for special purposes. Sufis do not set up institutions intended to endure because they say that the needs of a society are never exactly the same as those of other societies. The outer form in which the Sufis impart their ideas is transient, intended only for local operation. *(They have no churches or mosques)*

Neither do they set up their teachers for personality worship and strongly stress the danger of mistaking the vehicle for the objective. The teacher, while necessary, is a vehicle or conductor only. Rumi, one of their greatest masters, who died in 1273 A.D., said: "Look not upon my exterior form but take what is in my hand". Most of the Sufi masters flee from rather than seek public acclaim. *83 the founder of the "Builders"*

Sir Richard Burton (1821-1890) the explorer, achieved fame with a pilgrimage he made to Mecca. He was a famous Orientalist who translated many books about Oriental life and customs, including "The Thousand and One Nights", familiarly known as the "Arabian Nights", which contains many encoded Sufi stories. Sir Richard Burton was certainly a Sufi himself, but he was also a Freemason, being a member of the Scottish Lodge of Hope No. 337, which still meets in Karachi - in his time it was No. 350. "Sufism", he said, "was the Eastern parent of Freemasonry".

Sufis, indeed claim a very close connection with Freemasonry, which they consider to be far more ancient than the date of the foundation of the first Grand Lodge in 1717. The Sufi legends link the name of Dhun-Nun, a revered Sufi Master who died in 860 A.D., with at least one form of Freemasonry. He is in any case the earliest figure in the history of the Malamati Dervish Order, which has often been stated by Western students to have striking similarities with Freemasonry. There is a Sufic society called "The Builders" which in constitution and some of its symbolism is said to resemble Freemasonry. The Builders first flourished under that name in the ninth century. The parallels are extremely complex and not easy to understand unless one is familiar with Arabic. The pass-word of the Sufi society called "The Builders" is "al-Banna" and the Arabic word for Mason is also "al-Banna". They have symbols which correspond to the square and the level.

There are, according to the Sufis, ninety-nine divine names or attributes. The development of the effect of all these names produces the complete individual. The hundredth name is a secret revealed only when the seeker has become imbued with the spirit of the others. Now the hundredth or secret name they claim to be the original of the G symbol found in the centre of a Masonic Lodge. In the Builders this G is the Arabic letter Q which it closely resembles. And Q stands for the secret, the final element. The letter Q the Sufi Builders inscribe within a pentagram, and sometimes a star composed of two triangles which is the Star of David.

Pope, in the Dunciad, wrote:

"Of darkness visible so much he lent
As half to show, half veil, the deep intent."

"Darkness visible" is well known to us but the Sufis have parallels to this also. In one of their books (composed in 1319) the author says "The dervish path (a dervish is a Sufi) is dark in both worlds yet it is but the gloom that on the horizon of the desert gladdens the wayfarer and tells that the tents are near at hand, within a day of darkness shineth light".

Another assertion of the Sufis concerns the Knights Templars. The Sufi legend of the building of the Temple accords with the Masonic version but the Temple referred to is the Octagonal Dome of the Rock built to a Sufi mathematical design. The Solomon, however, of the Sufi builders is not King Solomon but the Sufi Maaruf Karkhi (d. 815) who was the disciple of Daud of Tai (Daud is Arabic for David) and was known as the 'Son of David' and referred to cryptically as Solomon, son of David. The murder commemorated by the Sufi builders is not H.A. but Mansur el-Hallaj, juridically murdered because of the Sufi secret.

These parallels between Sufism and Freemasonry are interesting in themselves but what I am more concerned with is the parallels of the teaching of the Sufis and that of Freemasonry. For Freemasonry, like Sufism, can be understood on many levels and if you just take all the ceremonies at their face value you will not even begin to understand all that there is in Freemasonry. On the face of it, F.M. has a high moral content but it also tells stories - in the Third Degree of the death of H.A. and the lost secrets. There are stories in many of the various degrees and orders of F.M. but above all there is the great legend in the Royal Arch. To understand these stories and what they have to teach us you must learn to understand them from other levels than those on the surface.

In one of the most profound pieces of ritual in F.M. we are sternly adjured in the face of our inevitable destiny to do several things and the first of them was "that most interesting of all human studies, the knowledge of yourself". That may seem deceptively simple but it is the most difficult of all human studies. The words "Man, know thyself" are generally ascribed to Socrates but they actually lie at the basis of many esoteric systems far older than Socrates. Gurdjieff, who took his knowledge from Sufi sources, said: "The first reason for man's inner slavery is his ignorance and above all his ignorance of himself. Without self-knowledge, without understanding the working and functions of his machine, man cannot be free, he cannot govern himself, and he will always remain a slave, and the plaything of the forces acting upon him".

He said that self study is the way of self-knowledge and the chief method of self study is self-observation. He explains that almost all the time we go about in a state of waking-sleep that we are unaware of ourselves and that instead of being in command of ourselves things "happen" to us. In order to observe ourselves we have to be able to remember ourselves. If you ask a man whether he can remember himself he will of course answer that he can and will probably think you a fool.

But Gurdjieff said that if a man really knows that he cannot remember himself he is already near to the understanding of his being. The first attempts at remembering are very difficult. One says to oneself "I am here", "I am walking" or I am doing this or that - at the same time keeping a certain detachment so that one is aware of observing oneself. Similarly with our negative emotions like anger, envy, etc, if when you are angry you can stand outside yourself and observe yourself being angry, you will become the controller, not the controlled. When you can do this it is very illuminating, one sees that most of the time one is not aware and that most of the time one is doing things mechanically as if one were asleep. This is the way to self knowledge and I have explained this at some length to show that the injunction in the charge after the Third Degree, to study the knowledge of yourself, is no easy study, it is a study of a lifetime - but it has great rewards.

Sufis call themselves by various descriptions: "The People of the Way", "The Keepers of the Tradition", "The Seekers of the Truth" and so on. They claim that a certain kind of mental and other activity can produce, under special conditions and with particular efforts, what is termed a higher working of the mind, leading to special perceptions, whose apparatus is latent in the ordinary man.

The teaching of the Sufi exemplifies an old truth that things of value come to us when we are ready and prepared for them. If we are not ready, they will mean nothing to us. It also shows that the search for the truth is not external, it is not a guide to conduct but a means of transformation of one's inner life. If the transformation takes place the conduct will follow naturally because it will come from what we are inside, not from what we do. "The Kingdom of Heaven is within you".

Like Freemasons, however, the Sufis conceal their teachings in stories. They conceal them thus because they believe that only the efforts to understand the various levels will create the effect that will really transform the hearer.

Sometimes the stories are short and amusing, intending to fix a certain attitude towards life. There is a famous classical comic figure known all over the East as Mulla Nasrudin and there are endless tales of his adventures and misfortunes. I will tell you just one. One day a neighbour found Nasrudin on his knees looking for something. "What have you lost, Mulla?" he said. "My key" said Nasrudin. After some searching the neighbour said, "Where did you drop it?". "At home" said Nasrudin. "Then why, for heaven's sake, are you looking here?". "There's more light here" said the Mulla. This may seem an absurd tale but it is intended to show that people do not know where to look when they seek enlightenment. So, of course, they attach themselves to various cults or theories, believing that they have the capacity to distinguish the true from the false.

The Nasrudin stories are the small change of Sufism but the real teaching stories are capable of effecting that transformation of being of which I have spoken when one has sought beneath the surface and understood what the story is intended to convey. Idries Shah says: "Unlike the parable, the meaning of the teaching story cannot be unravelled by ordinary intellectual methods alone. Its action is direct and certain, upon the innermost part of the human being, an action incapable of manifestation by means of emotional or intellectual apparatus". They must be read constantly so that the different levels of meaning can be gradually absorbed into the very texture of your inner self. Amongst the many I have studied, two stories stand out as having special significance for me. One is not supposed to try and interpret these stories to others because others might find different depths suited to their own needs.

I shall necessarily have to shorten the stories or they would take too long.

The first is called "How knowledge was earned". Once upon a time there was a man who decided he needed knowledge. He set off to look for it and arrived at the house of a Sufi. When he got there he said, "Sufi, you are a wise man. Let me have a portion of your knowledge that I may become worthwhile, for I feel that I am nothing".

The Sufi said, "I can give you knowledge in exchange for something I myself need. Go and bring a small carpet for I have to give it to someone who will then be able to further our holy work."

So the man set off and came to a carpet shop. "Give me a carpet, just a small one," he said, "for I have to give it to a Sufi who will give me knowledge for it".

The carpet man said "That is a description of your stage, but what about me? - I need thread for weaving carpets. Bring me some and I will help you."

So he went to the house of a spinner-woman who could let him have thread. But she said, "But what about me - I need goat-hair to make thread. Get me some and you can have your thread."

And so it went on - the goat-herd needed goats and the man who had goats needed a pen to keep them in, so he had to go to a carpenter and the carpenter had his needs too.

The tale is too long to repeat in full but eventually everyone was satisfied and the man got his carpet and his knowledge.

This story shows many things - that before one can receive real knowledge one has to be prepared for it and the preparation must not be superficial, it must be thorough and in depth. You cannot understand Sufism or Freemasonry just by reading a few books about it, you have to follow it down to the fundamentals. It also illustrates how those who can give the knowledge can induce those who wish to learn, in spite of themselves.

It is a cardinal tenet among the Sufis that an ordinary man cannot recognise the shaping influences he needs. He must perforce follow a teacher who knows where those influences can be found and how they are to be used.

The second story I want to tell you about is the story of MUSHKIL GUSHA. I wish I could tell it all here but it is very long. I should like to give you a précis of it and to show you something of what I have found in it though I have found much more than I can tell you about.

It is the tale of a woodcutter, a widower, who lived with his little daughter. He used to go every day to cut firewood which he brought home and tied into bundles. Then he had breakfast and afterwards walked into the nearest town to sell his firewood.

One day his daughter said "Father, I wish we could have some nicer food to eat." "Very well", said her father "I will get up extra early and cut more wood". So he did but when he put his large load down and knocked at the door, which was locked, his daughter was still asleep and did not hear him. So he lay down outside and slept. When he awoke he found that the door was still locked as his daughter thought he was in the town and she had gone for a walk. He decided that it was too late to go into the town that day so he went to cut more wood. When he returned his daughter was asleep in bed so he lay down again, quite exhausted.

He awoke very early next morning before it was light and he was cold and hungry. A strange thing happened, he heard a voice saying "Hurry, leave your wood and come this way". He walked in the direction of the voice, on and on, but he found nothing and he was far from home. Now he was colder and hungrier than ever and he was lost. He felt sad and wanted to cry but he lay down and fell asleep.

He woke up and began to go over in his mind what had happened to him since his daughter asked for different food, when he heard another voice saying "Old man what are you doing there?" And the woodcutter told all that had happened to him. "Very well" the voice said, "close your eyes and mount as it were a step". "But I do not see any step" the old man said. "Never mind, do as I say", said the voice.

As soon as the old man closed his eyes, he found that he was standing up and as he raised his right foot he felt that there was something like a step under it. He started to ascend what seemed like a staircase which began to move rapidly upwards. In a short time the voice told the man to open his eyes, and he found himself in a place rather like a desert where there were masses of coloured pebbles. "Take up as many of these stones as you can", said the voice, "then close your eyes and walk down the steps". The woodcutter did so and when he opened his eyes at the bidding of the voice he found himself at his own door. He went into the house and the little girl and her father shared the last food they had which was a handful of dried dates. Then he again heard the voice which said "Although you do not know it you have been saved by Mushkil Gusha. Remember that Mushkil Gusha is always here.

Make sure that every Thursday night you eat some dates and give some to a needy person and tell him the story of Mushkil Gusha. Make sure that the story of Mushkil Gusha is never forgotten. If you do this and it is done by those to whom you tell the story, the people who are in real need will always find their way."

The woodcutter put all the stones he had brought back into a corner of the house. They looked just like ordinary stones. The next day he took his enormous bundles of wood to the market and sold them easily for a high price. He brought his daughter all sorts of delicious things to eat and when they had eaten, the woodcutter said to his daughter: "Now I am going to tell you the story of Mushkil Gusha. He is the "remover of difficulties" and our difficulties have been removed by Mushkil Gusha and we must always remember him".

After that the woodcutter carried on as usual but when the next Thursday came he forgot to repeat the story of Mushkil Gusha. Later that evening neighbours came and said "Neighbour, give us a light from those wonderful lamps of yours which we see shining through the window." The woodcutter saw that the light was streaming from the pebbles he had put in the corner. But the light was a cold one for the pebbles had turned into jewels. He covered them up and sent the neighbours away.

They took the jewels one by one to neighbouring towns where they sold them for a high price. Then they decided to build for themselves a palace near the King's Palace. In due time the little girl became friends with the King's beautiful daughter. But by a misunderstanding, the princess thought the girl had stolen her beautiful necklace. The King confiscated the woodcutter's palace and the daughter was put into an orphanage. The woodcutter was later put in the public square and chained to a post. He was most unhappy. One day he overheard someone saying that it was Thursday afternoon and he remembered that he had forgotten to commemorate Mushkil Gusha "the remover of difficulties" for a long time.

Just then a charitable man threw him a coin. The woodcutter thanked him but said, "You are generous but money is no use to me. If you could just buy a few dates and sit and eat them with me, I should be eternally grateful". The man did so and they ate the dates and the woodcutter told him the story of Mushkil Gusha. When the man arrived home afterwards he found that all his problems had disappeared.

The very next morning the princess found the necklace which she thought the little girl had stolen. She told her father who restored to the woodcutter and his daughter all they had lost.

These are some of the incidents in the story of Mushkil Gusha. It is a very long tale and it is never ended. It has many forms and is called by other names so that people do not recognise it. But it is because of Mushkil Gusha that his story is remembered by somebody somewhere in the world day and night, wherever there are people and his story will always continue to be told.

Now it would be presumptuous of me to suggest that my interpretation of this story is the true one - it is purely subjective and every person who reads it and absorbs it must do so on whatever level he is able to understand it. I offer my view of it merely to show that it can be understood on different levels.

As I see it the special food the girl asked for may be thought of as spiritual food for inner enlightenment. But this is not to be gained without effort, as I have explained in the story of the carpet. It requires what Gurdjieff called "conscious labour and intentional suffering". In the story, the woodcutter laboured until he was exhausted before he was ready to receive what could be given. Even then he had to make the venture of faith, in closing his eyes and ascending the steps to a higher level.

"Faith", says Maurice Nicoll, "is more than belief. It means understanding on a level other than literal understanding. Faith is necessary to open up a part of the mind not opened up by the senses....it is a basis or plane on which another world of relations and values can be reached".

The ascent of the stairway is crucial to the story but even when the man reached a higher level he did not fully understand what had been given him. He had to undergo much suffering later on in the story before he reached the level of understanding he needed. There is a parallel in Freemasonry. Everyone enters the Craft, or for that matter the Royal Arch, with his eyes closed and is told to take certain steps. He is given, though he does not know it at the time, certain treasures. To many they always remain just stones, others learn in time that they are jewels of great price.

This venture of faith reminds one also of the three sojourners in the Royal Arch - they too, fearful of dying from damp or other unforeseen causes had to take the step in the dark before they received the great prize they found - the story is the same as Mushkil Gusha and the goal was the same.

When the woodcutter and his daughter realised the priceless value of what he had been given they used it for the wrong purposes, for self-aggrandisement and personal glory, so it was taken away from them. What was given him was for a different purpose and it was only after much suffering that he realised the important lesson that we are under an obligation to give out what has been given to us.

The telling of the story of Mushkil Gusha on a Thursday is not to be taken literally - it means that the spiritual knowledge that we have been given is to be given to others only at the proper time and in the proper way, not indiscriminately, for it is only for those who are ready for it and to whom it may help - to others it may mean nothing at all.

I realised when I first read the story that on several occasions in my life I had told the story of Mushkil Gusha before I had ever heard of him and as it happens it had the same effect as it had when the woodcutter, chained to his post, told it to the charitable stranger.

I should like to explain, however, that the object of this paper is not to try and make Sufis out of you - I certainly would not claim to be one myself, even after twenty years of studying these matters. But the teachings of Sufism have helped me to understand Freemasonry better and so I must pass them on.

As H.A. said, "Patience and industry will in due time enable the worthy Mason to a participation of the secrets of the Third Degree" but the secrets are on a level which must be sought for, as our ritual tells us, "through the paths of Heavenly Science, even to the throne of God Himself".

These are mysterious words and the understanding of them needs the kind of preparation of which I have spoken, and Sufism, which follows a parallel path to Freemasonry may be a means of aiding us in our search.

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