

TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

Spiritual Guidance in Islam

A case study: Sharafuddin Maneri

Divine guidance

THE NOTION of guidance is firmly established in Islam at its most fundamental level, that of God's guidance of his people. This is done through divine revelation granted to the various prophets to enable them to guide the people along the path to God. The original Islamic notion was very simple: there is only one religion (*dīn*)¹ which consists in acknowledging and worshipping the one true God. Unfortunately human beings were continually falling into the sin of placing somebody or something on the same level as God (*shirk*). The popular expression of this root sin was polytheism with its consequent idol-worship. God was thus moved to send prophets down the ages to call people back to the one true religion, that of belief in one God. This was Muhammad's pristine understanding, for he saw himself as a prophet sent by God to call his own people, the Arabs, from idolatry to the worship of the one true God, Allah. For him the various monotheistic religions were merely different forms of the one true religion. Only later on in Medina, when the Jews refused to acknowledge his prophetic mission, did he begin to think of Islam as a distinct religion. Thus it is the prophet Muhammad (d.632) who channels divine revelation to the Arabs through the *Qur'an*, the very word of God.

Another fundamental pivot on which the whole notion of guidance rests is found in the following Quranic verse: 'Your Lord brought forth descendants from the loins of Adam's children, and made them testify against themselves. He said: "Am I not your Lord?" They replied: "We bear witness that you are". This he did, lest you should say on the day of resurrection: "We had no knowledge of that"' (Q7,172). This covenant is given the visual form of God's summoning, as it were, every single human being before him for an instant in order to establish in clear terms the relationship of his lordship over each one of them. This is the common interpretation, but it needs to be pointed out that it is not a domineering type of lordship which is meant but one where the Lord looks after, cherishes, nourishes and educates those who are dependent upon him. It is a literary expression of the ontological dependence inherent in the creator-creature relationship and forms, as it were, the metaphysical backdrop for the entire spiritual life of the Sufis, the mystic saints of Islam.

Prophetic guidance

Although God's revelation, as found in its final form in the Quran, gives the general framework of the needed guidance, and even provides some detailed injunctions, a pious Muslim will have to look elsewhere to find the answers to a whole host of practical difficulties that arise in everyday living. Thus occurred the gradual development of Islamic law (*shari'at*) which one Muslim author has described as 'the way or road in the religion of Muhammad, which God has established for the guidance of his people, both for the worship of God and for the duties of life'.² The word itself originally refers to the beaten track leading to a well or spring—an image which lends itself to poetic development. Suffice it to say that one follows the beaten track along with everybody else: one does not try to find a new path for oneself. In addition to the divine guidance contained in the Quran the other great source is that provided by the example (*sunna*) of the Prophet himself and as found recorded in the Traditions (*hadith*). These two sources were elaborated by the early jurists who made use of analogical reasoning and general consensus. Thus was born Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*).³ Because of the comparative simplicity of Islamic belief, the great minds were more interested in answering the question, 'What is God's will for me in this particular situation?' than to grapple with theological problems such as exercised the great Christian thinkers down the centuries, who had the mysteries of the Incarnation and Redemption to contend with, not to mention that of the Trinity.

Community guidance

Because of geographical and other consequent difficulties, different schools (*madhab*) grew up in different centres. Even today orthodox Sunni Muslims—who form the vast majority—belong to one or other of the four great schools. There is no such thing as a uniform law for all Muslims. Interestingly enough, the root meaning of *madhab* is a road entered upon, from which the notion of a school emerges. We notice once again the central idea of going along a given road together with others and not seeking to blaze a new trail for oneself. The pious Muslim in India, for example, when confronted with a particularly knotty problem which the local officials do not seem to know how to handle, will write to the Dar ul-Ulum in Deoband for an official answer—known as a *fatwā*—from a highly trained specialist, a *mufti*. This decision will be given according to the Hanafite school, the one commonly followed in India.

Compensating somewhat for the lack of due regard for individualistic behaviour is the purpose behind the whole emphasis on law, namely the heartfelt desire to do the will of God. No matter what action a person may perform the most important aspect that has to be considered is whether it conforms to the divine will or not. For example, if you ask an

ordinary Indian Muslim why he is observing the annual month-long fast, the most common answer is simply because it is God's will!

The Sufis

As Islam spread in the early centuries, here and there individuals were drawn to a more personal response to the divine mystery. We read about Hasan of Basra (d.728), Malik Dinar (d.748) and Rabi'a, the outstanding woman Sufi (d.801). By the tenth century we find that Sufi Orders (*ṭarīqat*) have developed around famous Sufis, such as Junaid of Baghdad (d.910). Later on the more popular term was *silsila* (a chain) because, by this time, great emphasis was placed on being able to trace one's spiritual initiation back to Ali (d.661), Muhammad's first cousin and son-in-law to whom—it was commonly believed—Muhammad had entrusted special esoteric knowledge and spiritual power. This was one example of Shi'a influence in the development of Sufism. The word *ṭarīqat* was still used to indicate a specific group. The word itself means road, way or path. Sufis were often called 'The people of the way' while the more common term—Sufi—comes from the early practice of wearing wool (*ṣūf*) in imitation of Christian ascetics.

In so far as Sufis sought a more personal and intimate union with God there was tension with the jurists who were concerned with observable actions. One class of Sufis—those without the law (*bā sharʿ*)—did not help matters, for they considered themselves to be beyond the law. The most famous Sufis, however, adhered strictly to the law—those with the law (*bā sharʿ*)—and were indeed most scrupulous in its observance.

As mentioned, the outstanding Sufis attracted disciples and thus the institution of personalized guidance developed in Islam. This aspect was especially prominent in India, probably being reinforced by the Hindu tradition of the master-disciple (*guru—chēlā*) relationship. With this general background, let us look at a renowned Indian Sufi spiritual guide, Sheikh Sharafuddin Maneri.

The life of Sharafuddin Maneri

Before delving deeply into what Sharafuddin Maneri has to offer in the line of spiritual guidance it will be helpful to draw a brief life-sketch of the man.⁴ He was born in Maner, about 25 kilometres west of Patna, the capital of Bihar state in present-day India, around 1290 C.E. Both his father, Yahya, and his mother, Bibi Razia, belonged to families which were steeped in the Sufi tradition. Thus young Ahmad—as he was called—grew up in a God-centred milieu from his very birth. He had three brothers and at least one sister, but his was the specially graced nature which responded to the inspiring example of his pious parents. He did his early schooling in Maner but, when he reached his teens, a famous scholar, Maulana Abu Tau'ama, called in to Maner on his way

from Delhi to Sonargaon, the old capital of East Bengal, situated on the outskirts of Dhaka, the present capital of Bangladesh. Young Ahmad was eager to seize the opportunity to pursue his studies under such an eminent scholar, while Abu Tau'ama saw what a promising student he was and readily acceded to his request—made with his father's permission—to accompany him to Sonargaon, arriving there in the year 1304.

He was a diligent and capable student and threw himself wholeheartedly into his studies. Years of such unrelieved intellectual activity eventually put a severe strain on his health and we are told that he fell ill. The physicians of the locality recommended intercourse, so he took a slave-girl by whom he had a son, Zakiuddin. This probably occurred when he was close to thirty years of age. The arrangement was quite in accordance with Islamic Law and Zakiuddin had the full rights of a legitimate son. When Ahmad left Sonargaon in 1323 he took his young son with him to Maner. Sharafuddin⁵ himself says absolutely nothing about the boy's mother, and no ancient manuscript mentions her name. Sharafuddin could have exercised his right to marry if and when he wished, but he chose not to do so and lived a celibate life from the time he left Sonargaon until his death on 2nd January, 1381.

The highly educated thirty-three year old Sharafuddin could not settle down in Maner, yet it was not a thirst for knowledge that impelled him to go to Delhi, as he felt a confident satisfaction in his intellectual attainments. What was stirring within him was a desire to give himself completely to God, to seek him alone, and he felt the need for guidance. Sheikh Nizamuddin Auliya was the most renowned Sufi Sheikh at that time so Sharafuddin set out to meet him, in the spring of 1324, having entrusted his son wholly into the care of his own mother, Bibi Razia. The meeting proved to be disappointing. Nizamuddin recognized his worth but he was an old man with death just around the corner (d. April 1325), and Sharafuddin felt no attraction to become his disciple. He then set off to meet another famous Sufi of Panipat, Bu Qalandar, also near death (d. September 1324). He was impressed by his high spiritual attainments but noticed that he was not capable of offering guidance. Disappointed, he returned to Delhi and was on the point of leaving when his brother persuaded him to meet a lesser known Sufi, Sheikh Najibuddin Firdausi (d.1332), who lived quite close to the Qutb Minar. It was this meeting which changed his life and enabled him to become a great spiritual guide himself, for he was instantly attracted to Najibuddin and entrusted himself to his care and guidance. He remained with him until his death eight years later, having experienced for himself what it meant to be lovingly guided.

With the death of his guide he no longer wished to remain in Delhi and set out to return to Maner but, on the way, he turned aside into the jungle of Bihia in order to be alone with the Alone. After a year or so he

ended up in a cave in Rajgir, a hilly locality south of Patna, noted for its religious association with the Buddha, Mahavir, and countless Hindu, Buddhist and Jain ascetics. His cave was near a small spring and the spot is still a place of pilgrimage today. It is known as 'Makhdum Kund', for Sharafuddin became known as 'Makhdum-i Jahan' (The teacher of the world). Today he is referred to by the local people as 'Makhdum Sahib'. He managed only a modicum of privacy in his cave because some of Nizamuddin Auliya's disciples came to him for guidance, while the ordinary people came to get him to intercede with the local Muslim administrator by having him write petitions on their behalf. Because Nizamuddin's disciples were coming all the way from Bihar town, eighteen kilometres away, to consult him, he decided it would be easier for them if he were to go to Bihar each Friday for the congregational prayer and people could consult him there. Gradually his sojourn there was extended to Saturday, Sunday and even longer as the crowds grew. Finally he was simply forced to remain there permanently. This took place by 1336. He spent the rest of his life there until his death in 1381. He was buried next to his mother in a spot not far from his residence. People still come daily to his tomb to seek his intercession and, on his feast-day—the day he died, known as *urs* (marriage) because on that day he experienced the heavenly nuptials—huge crowds of people come. The word *Sharif* has been added to the name Bihar to indicate that the town has been honoured by his presence.

Sharafuddin the guide

The first thing we notice about Sharafuddin as a spiritual guide is the fact that he never sought to guide anybody. He was earnestly seeking intimate union with God in his cave in Rajgir when people came to him for guidance. Sheikh Bukhari, his first permanent disciple, went to him first when he was in Rajgir. His practice of going to Bihar each Friday was not in order to get more disciples—that was an unforeseen but not unexpected development—but simply to make things easier for those who were already coming to consult him. It was one of countless expressions of his exquisite sense of courtesy.

Sharafuddin himself took no initiative to construct any buildings which would formalize and institutionalize his standing as a Sheikh, a spiritual guide. His first humble dwelling was prepared for him by the chief Chishti disciple who had been visiting him in Rajgir. When the reigning Sultan, Muhammad bin Tughluq (1325–51) heard that he had emerged from solitude he sent him a Bulgharian carpet and ordered the governor of Bihar to construct a large *khānqāh* (hospice) for him and his disciples to live in, and directed that certain revenues should be utilized for its upkeep. All of this embarrassed Sharafuddin. He was loath to accept either the carpet or the hospice, but had to acquiesce when the governor

reminded what would probably happen to him if the Sultan's order was not executed! One cannot help but contrast his behaviour with that of some others who are eager to set themselves up as guides and to collect funds for an imposing establishment.

Literary productions

Sharafuddin left a number of Persian works behind him, in addition to several records (*malʿūz*) made of his discourses. Was there a subtle desire for fame at work here? One has only to examine the genesis of each of his literary productions in order to scotch such an interpretation. His first book is actually a collection of letters written to Qazi Shamsuddin who, on account of his administrative duties, was unable to come for personal guidance. Sharafuddin began to correspond with him. His secretary, Zain Badr Arabi, realized the value of the letters and asked permission to make a collection of them. Sharafuddin continued writing but made sure that he covered all the topics needed for anyone who wished to follow the Sufi path. Thus was produced the collection known as *The hundred letters*.⁶ Similarly his other writings originated in the needs of others, not his own.

Personal guidance

Three of Sharafuddin's hundred letters—numbers 5, 6 and 7—deal specifically with the topic of guidance, but the whole collection constitutes a manual for guidance. For Sharafuddin, the desire for personalized guidance, over and above what is available for all, is a grace from God. It is a genuine call from God himself. A person cannot decide to travel the Sufi way in a sincere, whole-hearted fashion, unless he or she is called by God, for 'the seed is such that it requires nothing except the divine grace in order to fall into the soil of one's heart' (p 25).⁷ He also speaks of those who 'place their feet on the path of seeking due to the irresistible attraction of the divine favour' (p 32). Without this inner attraction, no guide can 'make an unruly novice into an earnest seeker' (p 36).

Granted the presence of such an attraction, a novice, 'after undergoing genuine repentance, should seek a spiritual guide. He should be perfect, well-versed in the vicissitudes of the way, and firmly established in his high state. In short, he should be a man who has experienced both the horror of God's majesty and the delight of his beauty' (p 25).

For the Sufis, the central image of the spiritual life is that of a path or way (*ṛāḥ*) leading to God. Playing upon this image, Sharafuddin underscores the need for guidance:

Remember, too, that an ordinary road is infested with thieves and robbers, so that one cannot travel along it without an escort. As

for the mystic way, the world, one's ego, devils, men and jinn all infest this way, thus making it impossible to travel along it without an experienced, holy man as one's escort. Remember, further, that there are many slippery places where it is easy to fall. And one can be plagued with misfortune and dangers from behind. Many philosophers and worldly-minded people, as well as others lacking faith, piety or any semblance of morality, have become followers of their own base desires. They have gone without a perfect sheikh or leader who has reached his goal on this way, and have instead trusted in their own intellectual powers. They entered the wilderness where they fell and perished, losing even their faith (p 26).

Anyone who enters upon the Sufi way should not be surprised if difficulties occur: quite the contrary!

In the course of his pilgrimage he should expect to be assailed by spiritual crises. Also, various types of mystical experiences might occur: some might be satanic; others might be produced by his own ego; still others could come from the merciful one himself. This is entirely new to the novice and he cannot discern the source of these spiritual experiences. He needs the assistance of one well versed in discerning these various spirits (p 27).

As the pilgrim passes through various spiritual stages (*maqām*) he might reach one 'when his soul is stripped bare of its outer garment and a ray of the divine light will illumine it'. At this stage anything is possible—even the power to perform miracles and to achieve such a sense of union with God as to become proud of this fact. Unless he is guided by a sheikh at such a time 'there would be great fear that he might lose his faith and fall into the wilderness of imagining himself as God incarnate or as one identical with God' (p 27).

Sharafuddin is very much aware of the heady wine of both spiritual bliss and spiritual acclaim. It is not that he refers to them only once or twice and then gives a couple of illustrative anecdotes. Rather, his *Letters* and recorded discourses make it abundantly clear that he had drunk deeply of these twin cups but had not been inebriated by them. This treatment of both topics occurs in many different situations and displays both a surety of touch and an uncompromising attitude towards anything less than God. Having passed through these temptations himself he is able to guide others with a quiet certainty born of personal conviction.

The common period of training for a novice is three years, each devoted to a particular aim: 'One year's service on behalf of other people; one year devoted to God; and another year spent in watching over one's

own heart' (p 29). One feature of this period might well be a forty-day retreat (*chilla*) for, speaking of repentance as 'a radical shift in one's basic nature', Sharafuddin says that 'whoever commands a novice to undergo a forty-day retreat commands it for the sake of his charge, in order that his very nature might be transformed' (p 23). What was merely 'conventional faith' becomes 'real faith'. Letter 96 is devoted to the topic of such a retreat. In it he insists on the need for the 'protection of an experienced spiritual guide'; 'a properly constituted foundation'; 'fidelity to the requisite conditions of sincerity during the retreat itself'; and having a right intention, that is, 'in order that their faith might rest more secure; that they might be enabled therein to discern the various states of their souls; and, finally, in order that they might be able to perform all their actions sincerely for the sake of God Almighty'. Near the tomb of Sharafuddin's guide, Najibuddin, is a very ancient one-room structure which is obviously a prayer-cell. A modern scrawled notice had *chillagāh* (that is a place to perform the forty-day retreat, as well as other personal devotions). It seems that Sharafuddin made his retreat there, under the guidance of Najibuddin, and learned from personal experience about the fruits of such a retreat.

A simple question facing the would-be novice was: 'Where will a novice find a sheikh? . . . By what means can he recognize him as being *the man*?' (p 31). His answer is simple, even simplistic, yet it too is the fruit of personal experience: 'Each one of those who seek God has been allotted all that is necessary for him' (p 32). God will provide. This is an answer born of faith, not of human reasoning, and there are countless seekers who would endorse it.

While due place is given to guidance by means of personal instructions, much more emphasis is placed on the fruits of an intimate association with one's guide, who is one's *pīr-i suhbat* (guide by association). This makes sense, for nowadays we are much more aware of the way our basic attitudes were communicated to us. As the adage puts it, 'values are caught, not taught'. This is why openness of heart is so needed and Sharafuddin can write: 'When a righteous novice perceives, in his own heart, the beauty of a sheikh, he becomes enamoured of the beauty of his saintliness, draws peace and contentment from him, and begins his search' (p 32). We see in this teaching an echo of his relationship with his own guide, Najibuddin. He knew what it was to love his own guide and become completely open to his influence!

While Sharafuddin knows the value of guidance through books and letters when a person is not able to come for face-to-face guidance—as his *Letters* to Qazi Shamsuddin amply illustrate—nevertheless he would not approve of a novice who turned to books as a substitute for a guide when one was available. He has strong words on the topic: 'If a novice wants to learn all about these states from books, he becomes exactly like

someone who associates with the dead—and he too becomes dead at heart' (p 36)! This is because the greatest enemy to be overcome is that of human pride, and humble submission to another is the most effective tool for the task. 'The novice should follow the wishes of the sheikh, not his own! In this respect it has been said: "Discipleship is the abandonment of all one's own desires"' (p 32).

Sharafuddin has five letters (81–85) devoted explicitly to the struggle with one's carnal or animal soul, also known as the lower soul. It is one's *nafs*, the source of all unruly behaviour, from the grossly inhuman to the most subtle expressions of human pride. Naturally, during the unrelenting struggle against one's unruly soul one needs 'the grace and favour of Almighty God, and the shade of the riches of a compassionate spiritual master' (p 333). He teaches clearly that temptation 'has to take its origin from a man's inner desire'. It is only when such sinful desires have 'begun to appear that Satan pounces on them, drawing them out into the full light of a person's heart'. Thus 'Satan depends on the reality of the lower soul and the inordinate desire of the servant' (p 336). This is a very fine distinction for a Muslim spiritual guide of medieval Bihar!

Conclusion

Sharafuddin himself was an inspiration to countless disciples while his words, though primarily devoted to guidance, have also served to communicate both inspiration and encouragement to countless readers down the centuries. The Muslims of Bihar are understandably grateful to God for having sent such an outstanding spiritual guide into their midst.

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NOTES

¹ The word *dīn* means religion or 'the faith' as in the title 'Defender of the Faith' found on British coins. It, as well as all other words quoted, is in the singular number.

² Hughes, T.: *Dictionary of Islam*, p 285.

³ The classic work is *Development of Muslim theology, jurisprudence and constitutional theory*, by D. Macdonald, pp 65–117.

⁴ For a detailed exposition see *The way of a Sufi: Sharafuddin Maneri*, by Paul Jackson (I.A.D., Delhi, 1986).

⁵ The word 'Sharafuddin' is actually a title meaning 'The honour of the Faith'. It gradually replaced his given name, Ahmad. By the time he had become a renowned Sufi nobody would have dreamt of addressing him as 'Ahmad'.

⁶ *Sharafuddin Maneri: The hundred letters*, trans. by Paul Jackson (Paulist Press, N.Y., and S.P.C.K., London, 1980) in the series, 'The Classics of Western Spirituality'.

⁷ The page numbers refer to the work just quoted.