

September 15, 1971

Number 12. Whole number 2057. Volume 128

VOGUE

An ancient
way to
new freedom

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A hard-thinking, powerful writer
finds strength in Sufism,
the thousand-year-old Islamic mysticism

For a long time "mysticism" has been almost a joke in the West, although we have been taught that at the heart of the Christian religion have been great mystics and religious poets. If we knew more than that, it was that these people's approach to God was emotional, ecstatic, and that the states of mind they described made ordinary life look pretty unimportant. But our information, in a Christian-dominated culture, did not include the fact that the emotional road was only one of the traditional, and very ancient, approaches.

Recently, a feeling that the kind of education most of us get is not giving us information we ought to have has led to curiosity about Eastern cults, Buddhism, gurus of various sorts, or the dozen or so Yogas. Since the Holy Man, the Sage, has been no part of our culture for centuries, we have had no yardstick to judge the gurus by; but

the more eccentric in behaviour, wildly bearded, and sensational in utterance they are, the more attention they get. Our biases (since in the West we are preoccupied with money, the gaining and the keeping and spending of it) are likely to let us judge a Sage, genuine or not, by whether he takes money, and how much, and by the way he outwardly arranges his life. A man who lives in a damp cave on lentils is considered more holy than one who lives an ordinary life in society. But as a result of so many cults, gurus, crazy diets, people standing on their heads, meditations, and mantras, many sincerely curious have been put off and have retreated into an attitude summarised by this anecdote:

"What is your view about inner knowledge?" asked a dervish of a theologian.

"I have no patience with it."

"And what else?"

"It makes me sick."

"And what else?"

"The idea is revolting."

"How interesting that a logical and trained mind like yours, when asked for a view on a matter, can only describe three personal moods."

A Sufi would say that people living in a society where Sufism has been openly at work, and respected for what it offers, must regard all these attitudes towards mysticism as ill-informed, to say the least. "You will have to learn through that most banal of all things," says the Sufi to the would-be student, "you must learn through ordinary life." He is likely to have nothing to say to people looking for excitements and sensational experiences. A dervish on a journey met a yogi who was trying to plumb the secrets of the animal kingdom. The dervish said that a fish had once saved his life, and the yogi exclaimed,

"In all my years of meditation and discipline I have never approached such depths of knowledge! May I travel with you?" After some days the yogi said: "Now that we know each other better, do please tell me how the fish saved your life?" The dervish replied: "Now that we know each other better, I doubt whether it is any use telling you, but I will: I had not eaten for three days, and I was starving. That fish saved my life all right."

Sufism works through such jokes as this one, books, lectures, all sorts of everyday activities. A Sufi can be a scientist, a politician, a poet, a housewife, the usherette in the cinema and may never be known as one, since Sufism may have nothing to do with outward appearance and behaviour. It is in operation all the time, all over the world, in every country, sometimes openly, sometimes not. The

people offering it can be well-known, as it were, beating a drum to say, "We are here." Or they may teach secretly.

But what, you ask, *are* they teaching? What *is* Sufism? In a Persian dictionary, the entry for *Sufi* goes, in rhyme: "Sufi chist? Sufi Sufi'st . . . 'A Sufi is a Sufi'." This is not a form of coyness but an acknowledgment of the difficulty of defining something that must be experienced and in a different way for every person according to his or her state of development. "God is love" can be the highest experience man can have, or some words scrawled on a post carried by a poor old tramp—in between are a thousand levels of experience. How to guide the student from one level to the next is knowledge of the Teacher.

"Man must develop by his own effort, towards growth of an evolutionary nature, stabilising his conscious-

ness. He has within him an essence, initially tiny, shining, precious. Development depends upon man, but must start through a teacher. When the mind is cultivated correctly and suitably, the consciousness is translated to a sublime plane" (from *The Sufis* by Idries Shah). As Robert Graves wrote in his introduction to this book: "The earliest known theory of conscious evolution is of Sufi origin. The child's slow progress into manhood or womanhood figures as only a stage in his development . . . for which the dynamic force is love, not either asceticism or the intellect."

Now, all this is at a far remove from the sort of thinking regarded by us as "rational." But it is no odder than things we do believe or institutions we take for granted. In the West we all live beside one version or another of Christianity and believe, half believe, or have to put up with

some pretty bizarre ideas. Perhaps the most useful thing I personally have been invited to do in my own approach towards Sufi study is to "find out why you believe the things you do believe; examine the bases of your ideas."

Here is an approach to this philosophy that may seem a long way around; it is to take a look at those great Islamic civilisations that blossomed all over the Near East, Spain, Central Asia, North and West Africa, for a thousand years or more. In these, Sufism was always a strong visible force, dervishes being kings, soldiers, poets, astronomers, educators, advisers, sages. Sufism was the core of Islam. The contention is that the river of knowledge "from beyond the stars" that has run since Adam, through Noah and Abraham, and on through a hundred wise men and prophets, ran also through Jesus and then

Mohammed. It is not a question of one's being better or worse than another, smaller or greater, but of these men's being different aspects of the same Truth, or Way, manifesting as Divine Messengers. Both started world religions, both fed the inner heart of religion. During early Christianity this inner knowledge was available, then was lost, or went underground. But it was able to survive the death of Mohammed and his Companions and to illuminate Islam wherever it took root.

But it is very hard for us to look in this direction at all: Our history has made it almost impossible. You can try this small experiment: Go down to the nearest paperback-book shop, and leaf through the first dozen textbooks on popular astronomy, the history of art, meteorology, medicine, psychiatry, archaeology. In each will be found versions of the following: "Between

the decline of Greece and Copernicus, science stagnated in superstition." "Those temperate latitudes in which all civilisation has flowered." "Europe, the cradle of civilisation . . ." "Science was the creation of the Renaissance in Europe." "Before Freud the unconscious did not exist." "Jung's theory of the archetype . . ." A much trumpeted, and very flattering, history of civilisation, on television, is the history of art in Europe—with a few side-glances elsewhere.

This attitude is always implicit in our scholarship. It is one of the great pillars of our thought; but while Europe lay in the dark for centuries, marvellous civilisations brought some sciences to levels we have not approached—medicine and psychiatry among them. Individually, each one of us may or may not be Christian; but like it or not, we are steeped in Christian history. The centuries-long

wars with Islam are done with; but the residual mental blocks, the myopia, the parochialism, still cripple our thinking. Nor is it only Islamic cultures that suffer from our prejudices. When Copernicus and Galileo discovered that the earth went around the sun, this knowledge was not only a commonplace in Islamic cultures but, in Darkest Africa, cultures that our scholars are only just beginning to notice, let alone study, taught that the earth was the sun's planet. Long before Lister had to fight the medical hierarchy about germs and infection, African witch doctors were using antiseptics and other advanced medical techniques.

It is almost impossible for us to see Europe as it was, a little dark provincial fringe to great civilisations that sent emissaries, advisers, missionaries out of the plenitude of their arts and sciences to help the barbarians.

Then Europe came forward, in its particular contribution to human knowledge, technology; and it was the turn of the others to fall back. The newcomer, like an adolescent, has had to believe that he was the first to experience or to understand anything. But already this insularity is beginning to break down. When there has been an area of prejudice in a culture, a dam in the mind, the time of its dissolving is always exciting, one of sudden unexpected advance. As one researcher put it: "It is exactly as if great heaps of treasure were lying about in the open; but we were looking in another direction, we were hypnotised by the words Greece and Rome."

But Sufism is not a study of past civilisations—it must be contemporary, or it is nothing. Why is it being offered again in the West now? For the simplest of reasons—Sufism works

openly when it can, silently when it must. Even fifty years ago, the churches had so strong a hold on thought and morals that the introduction of this ancient way of thinking would have been impossible. But in an Open Society, Sufism can be offered openly; and perhaps we can now look calmly at the claim that it is a philosophy that can be hostile to no true religion, since all religions are the outer faces of an inner truth. As for people like myself, unable to admire organised religions of any kind, then this philosophy shows where to look for answers to questions put by society and by experience—questions not answered by the official purveyors of knowledge, secular or sacred.

"Man has had the possibility of conscious development for ten thousand years," say the Sufis. This thought shows itself differently in the claim that man is woefully under-

used, undervalued, and does not know his own capacities. I have believed this all my life, and that the idea is central to Sufism is one reason I was attracted to it. Put it this way: In a circus, every child born to a certain family will become a wonderful acrobat. Is this because these children have "acrobat's genes" or because they are expected to be acrobats? The implications shatter our assumptions about education. I must have read hundreds of manuscripts in my time. Very early on I saw that these authors have every bit as much talent as I have: All writers' early efforts are very similar. But some writers go on writing, others fall out: We live in a society where we all think in terms of success or failure. I am sure that the manifold talents, creativity, inventiveness of young children—who can sing and dance and draw and tell tales and make verses and whose view of life is

so very clear and direct—could go on into adult life and not disappear, as tends to happen in our system of education.

We see as quite different the process of intense concentration of the scientist or artist that results in flashes of extraordinary achievement, telepathy, second sight, hunches, the intimations of dreams . . . but these are seen by the Sufis as manifestations of the same thing, the first stirrings of this evolving part of humanity. But it is easy to waste this potential, for instance, by using drugs to stimulate the brain or by self-induced ecstasies. "It is only those who taste, who can know," say the Sufis, reiterating that this experience is not a question of intellectual development.

Every person comes to a point when the need is felt for further inner growth. Then it is wise to look for the Guide, the Teacher, the Exemplar,

the figure central to Sufism, who shows others what is possible. This person, the product of a certain kind of varied and intensive education, will be master not of one trade but of a dozen, learned through pressures of necessity, created by the people by whom he has been surrounded from birth, people whose duty it is to see that he should fulfill all his capacities. The child will be protected from the narrowing and littling of ordinary education, from the idea that a person can be a tinker or a tailor but not both, or, if both, then he is to be congratulated on his versatility.

In Sufism the notion of "two cultures" is non-existent; the idea that the arts and the sciences must be hostile, absurd. Of the great figures who have successfully combined mathematics and poetry (and much else), perhaps Omar Khayyám is best

known in the West. The products of Sufi schools are people who are prodigies from our point of view. Our forms of education produce nothing like them. People who, in our violent time, get whirled out of their little ruts through different countries, climates, ideas, languages, who have had to learn to earn their living in varied ways, who lose the arrogance of class and race are more likely to approach the Sufic idea of the whole man.

Idries Shah, who is bringing Sufism into the West now, is the product of this intensively varied education. He has been living in Britain for fifteen years and in that time has re-established Sufism as a vital force. For instance, he has just helped to decipher and to have performed ancient Egyptian music unheard by man for three and a half millenia. He has patented scientific

devices. He has been journalist, explorer, traveller; has studied archaeology, geology, economics, politics. He writes books on travel, anthropology, magic, Sufism, each unique in its field. He writes Sufic fables and stories of his own. He has written a prize-winning film script. He corresponds in Arabic, Persian, English, French, Spanish with experts in a dozen different fields. He is a husband, the father of three, and runs, from his home, the Institute for Cultural Research, which has hundreds of members and is in vigorous operation. Two years ago he started a publishing firm which has already put out a dozen books, all successful. But he would say: "Perhaps it is not me, but your ideas about the possibilities of man that are extraordinary." And he discourages all those who approach him with the idea of finding a "guru".

It does not do to say that man, a book, an institution, is Sufism, which is essentially something always the same, but always taking different forms. "If you encounter two institutions calling themselves Sufic, exactly the same, one of them must be a fake."

Those who are likely to recognise a Sufic current are those with noses for the fresh and lively; and this thing might be anything from a person, a book, a sharply angled statement by a physicist at a conference, the attitude of a politician, a new trend in fashion, a poem, a play, a garden planted and tended in a certain way. In every part of the world, the forms of Sufism differ, since they are shaped to fit the people living there.

The way Sufism is being taught in Britain now differs from what happens in Morocco, Afghanistan, Greece, South America; the teachers and the institutions containing Sufism for this time are different from those in the past, and always changing . . . a far cry from what our conditioning has taught us to call "mysticism". Before you can even start on Sufic study, you must first try to "learn how to learn" —and everything is unexpected.

Sometimes, when we look back over our lives, we may think: "I learned more through that experience than in all the rest of my life put together"; and the experience may be a tough job of work, a phase of a marriage, a serious love, an illness, a nervous breakdown. This way of learning, a time of crammed thoughtful living, is perhaps nearer to the learning of the Sufi Way than any other.