

THE CONCEPT OF FANĀ' IN SUFISM

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Islam in its fullest sense has three aspects: surrender or submission (*islām*), faith (*imān*), and *iḥsān*. In the definition of *iḥsān* given by the prophet Muḥammad (may peace be upon him), the word used for worship (*'ibādah*) means literally 'to serve God as His servant', and indicates not merely a series of acts but a perpetual state of remembrance of God. Thus, 'to worship God as if you see Him' implies perpetual remembrance of God, and the achievement of this form of spiritual condition is, practically indispensable. This paper is an attempt to discuss the meaning attached by the sufis to certain technical terms which are used in reference to this kind of state of proximity to God. The term *fanā'* which may be regarded as meaning 'extinction', 'evanescence', 'passing away', or 'annihilation', designates extinction of individual limitation in the state of nearness to God. As a human experience, *fanā'* pertains to both subject and object, psychologically and ontologically it implies the realms of the mystical as well as the metaphysical. Before discussing these aspects in detail, it seems necessary to elaborate briefly the meaning of *fanā'* according to some early sufis.

The term *fanā'* (passing away) and its opposite term *baqā'* are derived from the Qur'anic verse, "Everyone therein (i.e. in the world) passes away, and there remains the face of your lord, majestic splendid."¹ As for the definition of these terms, there is considerable agreement among the early sufis. According to al-Sarrāj, the original meaning of *fanā'* and *baqā'* is the passing away of ignorance through the continuance of knowledge, the passing away of disobedience through the continuance of obedience, the passing away of forgetting (God) through the continuance of remembering (Him), the passing away of regarding human action through the continuance of regarding God's providence in His eternal foreknowledge.² In another place al-Sarrāj defines *fanā'* as "the passing away of the attributes of the lower soul (*nafs*) and the passing away of the repugnance to, and reliance upon, anything that may happen. *Baqā'* denotes conti-

¹ Qur'an 55: 26-27.

² Al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Lumā' fī al-Taṣawwuf*, ed. by R.A. Nicholson, London, 1963, p. 213.

nuance in this condition. Again, *fanā'* is the passing away of a man's regarding in his actions that which he does through God's taking his place therein".³ Al-Sarrāj also uses the term *dhahab* (going away) which is nearly synonymous with *fanā'*. For him the term *dhahāb* signifies "the going away of the mind (*qalb*) from perception of sensible objects through the contemplation of that which it beholds; then the mind goes away from its going away, and this is infinite. To one in this state all things are non-existent, and nothing is perceived by the senses".⁴ Moreover, al-Sarrāj goes on to describe the process through which *fanā'* is gradually experienced by a sufi in the subjective state of psychological and mystical *fanā'*. The first sign of *fanā'* he says, is: "the vanishing of his consciousness of the present life (*al-dunyā*) and the future life (*al-ākhirah*) through the coming over him of the remembrance of God. The second is the vanishing of his consciousness of remembrance of God in his consciousness of God's remembrance of him, so that only his consciousness of God remains. The third is the vanishing of his consciousness of God through regarding his consciousness. Finally the vanishing of his consciousness of regarding his consciousness through the passing away of passing away and the survival of the survival".⁵

The definitions of *fanā'* given by al-Sarrāj show that most of them are either ethical or psychological in nature; they do not give us a metaphysical theory of the experience of *fanā'*. They are mostly statements about a subjective experience and not a theory about the objective reference to such experience. That *fanā'* is a gradual process starting from passing away of the worldly desires of the animal soul and a gradual loss of self-consciousness, and ending with a state of absolute absorption in the contemplation of God.⁶

It has been mentioned above that al-Sarrāj's conception of *fanā'* begins with the extinction of ignorance through the continuance of knowledge. When referring to this condition al-Hujwiri mentions that such a concept applies to the 'state' (*hāl*):

"The subsistence and annihilation of a state denotes, for example, that when ignorance is annihilated knowledge is necessarily subsistent, and that when sin is annihilated piety is subsistent, and that when a man acquires knowledge of his piety his forgetfulness

³ *Ibid.*, p. 341.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.

⁶ A.E. Affifi, *The Mystical Philosophy of Muhy al-Din Ibn al-Arabi*, Lahore, 1964, p. 138.

(ghaflah) is annihilated by remembrance of God, i.e. when anyone gains knowledge of God and becomes subsistent in knowledge of Him he is annihilated from (i.e. entirely loses) ignorance of Him, and when he is annihilated from forgetfulness he becomes subsistent in remembrance of Him, and this involves the discarding of blameworthy attributes and the substitution of praiseworthy attributes."⁷

In regard to the idea of remembrance of God in the realm of *fanā'* al-Hujwīrī assets:

"Annihilation is the annihilation of one attribute through the subsistence of another attribute. One may speak, however, of an annihilation that is independent of annihilation: in that case annihilation means 'annihilation of all remembrance of other', and subsistence means 'subsistence of the remembrance of God' (*baqā' al-dhikr al-ḥaqq*)".⁸

When discussing the questions of *fanā'* and *baqā'*, al-Hujwīrī seems to maintain that *fanā'* is a complete loss by the mortal self of the condition of his being, and *baqā'* is his being lost in the vision of the real. He achieves *fanā'* through the vision of his own actions and *baqā'* through the vision of the act of God.⁹

Both al-Sarrāj and al-Hujwīrī seem to emphasize that the ultimate aim of sufism is either purely ethical or purely psychological or both, i.e. it aims at either a complete recognition of the absolute will of God, regarding it as the prime mover of all that takes place in the world; or absolute abandonment of personal desires and ridding oneself of evil characteristics which pertain to the world of nature; or the abandonment of consciousness of 'self' and the concentration on contemplation of God alone. So, *fanā'* explained by these early sufis is another word for abandonment, and *fanā'* of 'self' simply means abandonment of consciousness of 'self' or abandonment of some attributes or qualities of 'self'.¹⁰

In general, the concept of *fanā'* can be described as ontological and metaphysical on the one hand, and mystical and psychological on the other. Metaphysically, the universe as such is in perpetual state of *fanā'* which can be summed up in the saying: "God was and there was nothing

⁷ Al-Hujwīrī, *Kasb al-Maḥjūb*, Trns. by R.A. Nicholson, London, 1976, 242.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

⁹ M. Hamiduddīn, "Early Sufis: Doctrine", in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, ed. by M.M. Sharīf, Germany, 1963, 1, 332.

¹⁰ Affīfī, *op. cit.*, p. 138–139.

with Him; He is now as He was then.¹¹ Everything in it (i.e. the universe) perishes and there remains the face of your Lord'.¹² The knowledge of *fanā'*, according to al-Hujwīrī, lies in one's knowing that this world is perishable, and knowledge of *baqā'* lies in one's knowledge that the next world is everlasting.¹³ This is what Ibn al-'Arabī means when he interprets *fanā'* as "passing away from the whole world, i.e. the cessation of contemplation of the phenomenal aspect of the world and the realization of the real aspect which underlies the phenomenal."¹⁴ In regard to the subjective state of *fanā'*, al-'Aṭṭās has given an interpretation of what he calls mystical *fanā'*:

*"In the subjective, psychological and mystical fanā', the one who experiences it undergoes two stages: annihilation of his self-consciousness; and annihilation of the consciousness of that annihilation (fanā' al-fanā'). so that he then fully realizes his true self and 'sees' and 'witnesses' Reality by it. The Reality that is seen or witnessed by that self is objectively, ontologically and metaphysically the 'unification' of 'gathering' (jam') together of the phenomenal world of multiplicity into the absolute unity of the One Real Being".*¹⁵

At a stage where the mystic realizes his true self and 'sees' or 'witnesses' Reality by it, he himself is in a perpetual state of *fanā'*. It is at this stage that the sufi realizes the non-existence of his phenomenal 'self' and 'the endurance' (*baqā'*) of the unchangeable, unperishable substance which is its essence. This leads to the passing away from all the attributes of God and their relations, i.e. the contemplation of God as the essence of the universe rather than its cause, as philosophers say. The sufi then does not regard the universe as an effect of a cause, but as a Reality in appearance (*Ḥaqq fī al-Zubūr*).¹⁶ In spite of his spiritual experience of *fanā'*, *fanā' al-fanā'* and *jam'*, his *shubūd* is impaired by human subjective consciousness, for he has not transcended this spiritual stage and has returned to the world of multiplicity, seeing only unity and nothing else.

¹¹ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-'Aṭṭās, *The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri*, Kuala Lumpur, 1970, p. 97.

¹² *Qur'an* 55: 26–27.

¹³ Al-Hujwīrī, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

¹⁴ Affifi, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

¹⁵ Al-'Aṭṭās, *Comments on the Re-examination of al-Raniri's Hujjatul-Siddiq: A Refutation*, Kuala Lumpur, 1975, p. 109.

¹⁶ Affifi, *op. cit.*, pp. 144–145.

Al-'Aṭṭās clarifies the division of people in respect to the problem of vision (*musbāhadab*). He states that a brief allusion of this term has already been given by al-Sarrāj in the *Luma'*.¹⁷ A detailed account of this term is given by Hayder 'Amūlī, a noted 14th century Persian sufi metaphysician, in his *Jāmi' al-Asrār wa Manba' al-Anwār*. He categorises three classes of people in regard to the problem of vision: the first refers to the common people (*al-'awāmm*) or men reason, the second refers to the elect (*al-khawāṣṣ*) or men of mystical intuition; and the third refers to the super-elect, or the elect among the elect (*kbawāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ*) who combine in themselves the best of the qualities of the preceding classes. Therefore, they are called men of reason and mystical intuition. As a matter of fact, the sufis intuition yields knowledge of certainty by means of a vision.¹⁸

Al-Hujwīrī asserts that vision can never occur without the novice's hard work (*mujābadab*).¹⁹ An explanation of the significance of this hard work, in so far as it is a necessary condition for his vision with reality, is that it is a process of disciplined prayers and ascetic practices which ultimately results in such a refinement of the sufis personality as to rid it of all that is base and low in it. The early sufis regarded the immediate vision with Reality as always a matter of grace rather than something earned by the sufi only because of his having worked so hard. Furthermore, they regarded vision as only the beginning to which there is no end, because Reality is infinite.²⁰ In addition, at the stage of *fanā'* vision can be described only approximately as presence or proximity combined with *'ilm al-yaqīn* (knowledge of certainty). The station of sincere *'ilm al-yaqīn* leads further to *'ayn al-yaqīn* (vision of certainty) the station of *ma'rifaḥ* (gnosis)- until it is consummated in *ḥaqq al-yaqīn* (reality of certainty), which is the stage of God's friends.²¹ At the stage of *ḥaqq al-yaqīn* the sufis are sometimes called men of reason and intuition. In other words, it is the stage where the sufis attain their mystical vision in complete annihilation. Al-Ghazālī expressed it by such phrases as *fanā' kulli* (complete annihilation) and *fanā' fī al-tawḥīd* (annihilation in divine unity).²² How-

¹⁷ Al-Sarrāj, *op. cit.*, pp. 329–330. He defines *al-musbāhadab* as a "spiritual vision of God in public or private, without asking how or in what manner".

¹⁸ Affīfī, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

¹⁹ Al-Hujwīrī, *op. cit.*, pp. 200f.

²⁰ Hamiduddīn, *s,op. cit.*, p. 329.

²¹ A.M. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, U.S.A., 1975, pp. 141–142.

²² Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' Ulūm al-Dīn*, Egypt, A.H. 1346 II, pp. 256–257.

ever, this does not mean 'fusion', 'identification', 'incarnation' and so on.²³ When discussing the question of *fanā'* al-Sarrāj has seriously thought the danger of the idea of incarnation (*ḥulūl*). He severely criticizes the theories of *fanā'* which are current in his time. He directs the following argument against the sufis who believed in fusion or incarnation:

*"Some mystics of Baghdad have erred in their doctrine that when they passed away from their qualities they enter into the qualities of God. This involve incarnation or leads to the Christian belief concerning Jesus. The doctrine in question has been attributed to some of the ancients, but its true meaning is that when a man goes forth from his own qualities and enters into the qualities of God, he goes forth from his own will, which is a gift to him from God, and enters into the will of God, knowing that his will is given to him by God and that by virtue of this gift he is served from regarding himself and becomes entirely devoted to God; and this is one of the stages of unitarians. Those who have erred this doctrine have failed to observe that the qualities of God are not God. To make God identical with his qualities is to be guilty of infidelity, because God does not descend into the soul, but that which descends into the soul is faith in God and belief in His unity and reverence for the thought of Him."*²⁴

It is obvious from the context that al-Sarrāj does not condemn the doctrine of the passing away of human qualities, which, indeed, form part of his explanation of *fanā'*: he only rejects what seems to him a dangerous interpretation of the doctrine. In addition, his argument seems to imply that some sufis against whom he was directing his attack must have held that the ultimate aim of sufism was to become united with God (in the sense of *ḥulūl*).²⁵ The sufis usually use the term *waṣl* when referring to the state of union with God. When such a term is used, it simply denotes a symbolic expression (*'ibārah*) the meaning of which excludes the notion of the sufi in the state of *fanā'* becoming one with God. For Ibn al-'Arabī, when he speaks of mystical union with God, means a state in which an already existing union is being realized or varified. Union alludes to the sufis realization, when his illusory self has passed away, that he in his true

²³ M.A. Quasem, *The Ethics of al-Ghazali, A Composite Ethics in Islam*, 2nd ed., New York, 1978, p. 71.

²⁴ Al-Sarrāj, *op. cit.*, p. 433. See also R.A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*, London, 1975 pp. 157–158; "The Goal of Muhammadan Mysticism", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1913, pp. 58–59.

²⁵ Affīfī, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

self was, is and will always continue to be 'one with God' – or rather he is God, since God reveals Himself only to Himself. The manner in which *fanā'* comes about is described by al-Jīlī thus:

"When God desires to reveal Himself to a man by means of any name or attribute, He causes the man to pass away (fanā') and makes him nothing and deprives him of his (individual) existence; and when the human light is extinguished and the creaturely spirit has passed away, God puts in man's body, without incarnation, a spiritual substance, which is God's essence and is neither separate from God nor joined to man, in exchange of what he deprived him of, which substance is name the Holy Spirit (rūḥ al-quḍus).

The concept of *fanā'* is very closely connected with *ma'rifaḥ* (gnosis). The theologians make no distinction between the terms *'ilm* (knowledge) and *ma'rifaḥ*. However, the sufis hold that one must not be confused with the other. For the theologian sure and certain knowledge is *'ilm*; therefore *ma'rifaḥ* is *'ilm* and nothing else. They consequently think that the possessor of knowledge (*'ālim*) and the possessor of gnosis (*'ārif*) mean one and the same thing. But in sufism, as is well known, there exists a clear distinction between the two terms. Al-Hujwīrī asserts that the distinction between knowledge and gnosis is that knowledge can be acquired, while gnosis is a gift of God.²⁶ Therefore, knowledge can never be a substitute for gnosis. As a matter of fact, gnosis constitutes the highest knowledge which the sufi acquires in his spiritual knowledge. As regards this knowledge, man can only receive it through his acts of worship and devotion; but it also depends upon God's grace and man's own latent spiritual power and capacity created by God to receive it; he receives it through direct insight or spiritual experience (*dhawq*) and through unveiling to his spiritual vision (*kashf*).

As far as the sufis experience is concerned, *fanā'* takes place at the spiritual states (*aḥwāl*) which the adept experiences when he passes through his journey along the way (*tariqah*) to God. According to technical sufi terminology, there is a difference between state (*ḥal*) and station (*maqām*).²⁷ Each of these stands for a specific type of development of the sufi. Station is a general term which covers all these stages which, after the sufis initial contact with reality, are considered obtainable through his own toil and labour. State, on the other hand, covers all those

²⁶ Al-Hujwīrī, *op. cit.*, p. 267.

²⁷ This paper is not an attempt to elaborate the nature of states and stations in sufism. However, it provides a brief distinction between these terms in connection with *fanā'*.

states which are the result of the ceaseless flow of grace of which the sufi remains the recipient so long as he remains steadfast in his pursuit of reality. This is expressed by al-Hujwiri as follows:

“Station denotes ‘anyone’s standing’ in the way of God, and his fulfilment of the obligations appertaining to the station and his keeping it until he comprehends its perfection so far as it is in man’s power State, on the other hand, is something that descends from God into a man’s heart, without his being able to repel it when it comes, or to attract it when it goes, by his own effort. . . . Station belongs to the category of acts, state to the category of gifts. Hence the man that has a station stand by his own self-mortification, whereas the man that has a state is dead to ‘self’ and ‘stands’ by a state which God creates in him.”²⁸

Only a few of the almost infinite series of stations which a perfect sufi may achieve, are explicitly mentioned by the early sufis. However, we know which of them is the first and which is the last, for al-Hujwiri sums up the whole thing as follows:

“The first station is repentance (tawbah), then comes conversion (inābāt), then renunciation (zuhd), then trust in God (tawakkul), and so on. . . . Satisfaction (ridā’) is the end of the stations and the beginning of the states . . .”²⁹

Al-Hujwiri indicates that he believes to be the true relation between station and state, by saying that satisfaction is the last of the stations but the beginning of the states. This shows that in spite of the earlier impression that the two lines which intersect at any point, the correct theoretical position is that the states begin where stations end. This is in keeping with the basic attitude of the sufi that in whatever he achieves he is in the last resort indebted more to his Creator than to his own personal endeavours. This point of view looks more logical. If stations are achieved by the sufi through his personal endeavour, the series cannot be infinite merely because his personal endeavour must have a limit. States, on the other hand, since they are based on the infinite acts of grace, must necessarily be infinite as a series. The two series of states and stations cannot run parallel; if one has to end before the other begins, it must be the finite, for the infinite will never come to an end.

The discussion of the stations being a finite series of states and states being an infinite series of states through which a sufi may travel and attain *fanā’*, raises an interesting issue. Are we really justified in believing that the

²⁸ Al-Hujwiri, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 181f.

sufis states constitute an infinite series of state of development to which there is no end?. Whatever else one might say in order to answer to the question within the framework of the *Shari'ah*, the answer in the affirmative is completely ruled out. There must be a point at which the development of the sufi must stop in order to remain short of the status of a prophet. Discussing the superiority of the prophets to the saints, al-Hujwiri asserts that the prophets are superior to the saints, because the end of saintship is only the beginning of prophecy.³⁰

It is obvious, then, that the concept of *fanā'* in sufism depicts a profound thought of the sufis spiritual experience. It is a state where he attains his highly mystical experience through the vision of Reality. More importantly, the notion of *fanā'* illustrates how Islam as a universal religion focuses its vision of Reality.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 236.