

## **An Islam of peace and love**

*By Karim Ben Driss*

A doctor in sociology and a sufi in his heart, Karim Ben Driss has been following the path of knowledge for the last twenty years under the guidance of living master. His views on contemporary Sufism are a combination of rigorous scientific research and an inner knowledge of this spiritual tradition. An expression of the love that colors man's interaction with the divine Presence and with the world, as taught in the Sufi tradition, his message is also one of interfaith dialogue, between East and West, between the great religious traditions...

A master perfumer had an apprentice who had been at his service for a number of years. The master made use of all his talents and experience to convey and teach to the student the delicate art of perfume making. Beyond the recipes and proper dosage to follow, the art of preparing perfume is tributary to the sense of smell. Without this olfactory intuition, a talent that can be taught, cultivated and developed, the art of making fragrances remains illusive, even mysterious. And it seemed that despite his efforts, the unfortunate apprentice could not make his own the delicate art of discerning the different emanations and scents.

One day, the apprentice appeared in the master's shop looking quite worried and went on to explain that there was a shelf in the back of the store on which there was two bottles. He said that these two bottles were full to the brim and that their weight might eventually break the shelf. He suggested that one bottle should be removed.

Hearing this, the master perfumer was surprised and told the apprentice to look again as he was quite certain that there was only one bottle on the shelf. " No need," answered the apprentice, " come and look for yourself." The master went to look at the shelf and, as he had thought, saw only one bottle on the shelf. He turned to the apprentice and said: " I see only one bottle." But the apprentice was undeterred and explained that he clearly saw two bottles, trying to convince the master that he was right. Annoyed, the master ordered the apprentice to pick up a stick and break one of the bottles, as this would solve the problem.

The apprentice agreed with the master's solution and did what he was told to do. But as soon as he hit one bottle and broke it into a thousand pieces, he saw, to his surprise, that the other one also disappeared at the same time, as if by magic.

"Are you happy now?" asked the master. "I hope that one day you will come to realize that you are cross-eyed and that everything appears to you in double."

## **A Troubled Vision**

According to the Muslim point of view, a point of view shared by the other great monotheistic religions, there is, beyond the apparent multiplicity of the world, an underlying unity common to all things. This notion of an all-pervasive and penetrating unity is an intimate companion that he keeps with him through his entire life. This thought nourishes him, guides him and gives him a direction; in other words, it provides Meaning. In time, this universe of Meaning is absorbed, recognized and becomes a living reality. In the Islamic tradition, this relationship with unity, which is none other than the relationship with God, is the meeting of the living with the Living. But, this living perception of the uniqueness of Being cannot be realized without first acknowledging the unity that binds all of creation.

Thus, creation, being a living entity, is a crucial participant to this spiritual symphony that confirms the reality of the one and unique God. The traditional Man's tragedy is to be veiled from this unifying presence of the One Being. The outward appearance of the world is a veil to him and consequently he is untouched by the underlying unity, both subtle and all pervading, binding of all creation. Condemned to suffer the consequences of the adamic fall, traditional Man suffers from spiritual strabismus. When he turns away from his ontological origins, this squinting brings about disastrous consequences, as can be seen in today's society.

The soul, being both a tyrant and a victim of the world of appearances, can find salvation in the spiritual perspective offered by Islam; Sufism, considered "the heart of Islam", is an expression of this reality. All the spiritual tools inherent to this tradition serve as an invitation for the human being to reach beyond his individual self and realize the true state of affairs, which is the peaceful unity of all existing things. In other words, the sacred emanations stemming from the spiritual practice makes clear one's vision

so that one sees the whole of creation and the underlying unity beyond the apparent diversity.

### **The Religious Paradox**

Modernity has established itself to the detriment of tradition. It only established itself, became legitimate, by negating the spiritual outlook inherent to tradition. What is left if the spiritual dimension inherent to the tradition is taken out? The answer is as follows: there only remains rules and codes of conduct without real substance. This tendency has even been stronger with the arrival of post-modernity. Post-modernity's reason for being is to assimilate all that is existent, including tradition, and to redefine these elements so they be part of an environment of infinite possibilities all equal, one with the other.

Post modernity heralds the crowning of multiplicity in a world that has only meaning in a multi faceted reality.

This trend of evolution has tragic consequences for a swallowed up tradition that is reduced to being only one of the many possibilities. As a group or phenomena amongst others, tradition claims its legitimacy, its rights and demands an equal presence. Having become an ideology, it is now part of the noisy discourse claiming domination. Politically inclined, it contributes to the destruction of its own potential. The pilgrim's staff has, under the influence of modern times, become the stick of the justice maker. In the name of a subjective notion of unity and tradition, the stick of justice is used as a tool for destruction and braking apart, as a means for imposing its falsified views.

Misused, tradition has lost its substance and its many spiritual flavors. Strangely enough, the very elements that guided man in his quest for truth and helped him get rid of his strabismus have now become an argument for the contrary, meaning the reinforcement of multiplicity.

Is this not a religious paradox?

### **Islam, a land of peace**

Islam is first and foremost a means of spiritual knowledge. When knowledge is evoked in Islam, it refers to the unveiling of spiritual truths. This possibility is directly linked to our reason for being here on this earth. This tradition recognizes both the manual aptitudes of the ***homo faber*** and the intellectual capacity of the ***homo sapiens***. But beyond its

natural inclinations, the spiritual tradition of Islam recognizes the spiritual predisposition within man. This predisposition is linked to the divine breath, which is inherent to every human being. According to the Islamic tradition, God shaped man with His own hands and then blew the breath of His own spirit within him. It is the presence of this divine breath that predisposes Man to be the recipient of spiritual knowledge.

Created in God's image, Man, in the Muslim tradition, is conceived as a theomorphic being whose ontological mission is to rediscover this forgotten spiritual space that is his true inner nature.

Sufism, being a spiritual tradition within Islam, assumes this role. Beyond the exterior outlook on things, Sufism is an invitation to inner contemplation. From this perspective, the cult of Islam has no other reason for being than to establish inside of us this penetrating and soothing unity by means of contemplation. This kind of knowledge is quite opposite to what the normal definition of knowledge is. This kind of knowledge is not consequential to us stealing secrets from nature or in us its exploitation and neither in us exerting our domination. Real knowledge stems from a contemplative vision of the world, and this vision is the fruit of love. Without love, we are veiled from even the mere possibility of being touched by the gifts found in the spiritual scents. Love, from a Sufi point of view, is an essential condition in order to be able to open the doors of knowledge.

What is knowledge? There is a path leading to spiritual knowledge. This path, as has been mentioned before, is a means by which Man can regain his lost and forgotten spiritual dimension. Love for beings and creation is the movement that brings us forward in our quest, and we are moved by the all-merciful presence of God. Let us remember this divine saying: " I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known, so I created the world so that I might be known." If then the very creation of the universe is an act of love, how can we not echo love with love?

Spiritual knowledge is the gift we receive when we lovingly follow the path of return to the divine. This "retracing the arc of origin" is achieved through a series of unveilings, and each one reveals a particular aspect of this knowledge. "He who knows himself, knows his Lord", we are reminded in the sacred texts. This returning to the source of Being is, in a way, made possible by affirming the negative: the more we know and understand our limits, the more God reveals His infinite mercy to us.

Those who have " retraced the arc of origin" back to the very source of existence are known in Islam as Sufis. So many tales, stories, anecdotes, poems, treatises and revelations have been handed down to us as an invitation to this spiritual awakening. For those who aspired to this kind of knowledge of Being, their entire life was an opportunity for learning. These men and women, known as the people of God (ahlû Lah) have, by their love of God, reestablished contact with this sacred breath present in all of us and thus claimed victory over their strabismus. According to the Sufi tradition, by realizing the full potential of this spiritual dimension inherent to the human being, they have attained the highest degree of "humanness", more precisely theomorphic, and reached the ultimate aim, the intimate knowledge of God. This is why such a person is called the " knower of God".

I would like to take as an example Jalaluddin Rumi, one of the great figures of the Sufi tradition. The events surrounding his death in 1273 were in themselves a great source of teaching. On the day of his burial, as the procession, mainly composed of his followers and Muslims, was heading towards the cemetery, an increasing number of Christians and Jews began to join their ranks. The Christians, deeply distraught, claimed that Rumi was one of them. " But no," replied the Jews " he is one of us". The Muslims, unable to contain themselves rectified the situation by saying to both groups that Rumi was a Sufi, and first and foremost a Muslim. Then, at that moment, they all realized that what had brought them together was their love for this sublime Master and that what united them was above religion and that it lay in a kingdom where reigned an infinite peace.