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Sufi Philosophy

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The article entitled "Sufi Philosophy" in the famous 1967 edition of The Encyclopedia of Philosophy has long struck me as something of an enigma. It was authored by a William Gerber who, I suspect, was the author of an ambitious (but long forgotten) work of analytical philosophy entitled The Domain of Reality (1946). Why Gerber was selected by the editor of the Encyclopedia to contribute an article on Sufism is unclear. There are a variety of factual errors in the article that suggest he had no access to texts in Arabic or Persian (andor little or no facility in either language). He was entirely dependent upon Orientalist scholarship for what information he had about /tasawwuf and, even then, appears to have misread some of his sources.

Despite these unfortunate failings, the article offers peculiar insights into this complex and important movement within the Islamic tradition. How Gerber arrived at these insights, however, is a mystery.

After a couple of paragraphs in which he attempted (with mixed success) to account for the origin and character of the movement, Gerber stated categorically that

Among the principal teachings of Sufism are the following:

(1) Absolute Being (God) is also Absolute Beauty.

(2) Since beauty tends toward manifestation, Absolute Being developed the phenomenal world.

(3) To win a sense of direct communion with the Absolute Being behind the phenomenal world, one should practice the quietistic virtues (poverty, austerity, humility, fortitude, and discipline), devote oneself to the ways of inwardness (withdrawal, silence, solitariness, and self-examination), and keep in mind a constant awareness of God (with faith, awe, and desire).

(4) It is useful to utter certain slogans...as reminders of the mystic belief and aim and as aids to concentration on the quest for unification.

(5) If one follows these directions with sufficient perseverance, one will advance through the standard mystic stages of concentration, apprehension of the oneness of everything [this claim on Gerber's part is somewhat problematic], sudden and unpredictable illumination, blissful ecstasy, sense of union with the Deity, sense of one's own nothingness, and sense of the nothingness beyond nothingness.

What is immediately striking about this summary of the "principal teachings of Sufism" is Gerber's appreciation of the aestheticism that is almost everywhere implicit throughout the movement, but only occasionally rendered explicit in its classical expressions. Gerber's apprehension of the movement's underlying aestheticism and his decision to place it front and center in his brief summary of tasawwuf's "principal teachings" helps, in my mind, to redeem his article from the many factual inaccuracies that otherwise mar it.

It is sometimes the case that the eyes of the untutored see more clearly than the eyes of experts.