Chapter 7

The Concept of Sakīna in Suhrawardī

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The Light of Sakīna in Suhrawardī’s Philosophy of Illumination

Sakīna is a term that Shaykh al-Ishrāq Shihāb al-Dīn Yahyā Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191), the founder of the “philosophy of illumination” (ḥikmat al-ishrāq), uses in some of his philosophical and mystical works in more than one sense. The only clear definition he offers for this term is that it stands for a particular inner light that a philosopher-mystic experiences on the path leading to the knowledge of God (maʿrifa). This idea is elaborated in one of Suhrawrdī’s Persian treatises, namely the Ṣafīr-i sīmurgh (The song of [the mythological bird called] Simorgh).1

Sakīna, according to Suhrawardi, is not the only kind of light that is experienced by a philosopher-mystic. The path that leads to the knowledge of God is divided by Shaykh al-Ishrāq, from the point of view of man’s inner enlightenment, into three main stages: the elementary, the intermediate, and the final. At each stage a special kind of light is experienced by the traveler, to which Suhrawrdī gives a different name. The light that illuminates the heart of man at the intermediate stage is called by him sakīna.

Sakīna is not, strictly speaking, a philosophical term, but rather a religious one. It appears in six verses of the Qurʾān and in several prophetic Traditions. In the Ṣafīr-i sīmurgh, Suhrawardī himself quotes two of these verses. One of these verses is about God sending down his sakīna on the Prophet when he is in the Cave with Abū Bakr: “Then God sent down on him His Shechina, and confirmed him with legions you did not see” (1X, 40). In the other verse,

1 This treatise was first edited by O. Spies and S.K. Khatak and published with an English translation in Three Treatises on Mysticism by Shihaboddin Suhrawardi Maqṭūl, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1935. Utilizing this edition and another manuscript, an older and more reliable one, S.H. Nasr prepared another critical edition and published it along with other Persian treatises by Suhrawardī in: Shihaboddin Yahyā Sohravardi, Oeuvres Philosophiques et mystiques, tome 111, Tehran, 1977. I used these editions for the present study and also consulted two other manuscripts (Aya Sofya 4821, Majles-e Senā 14316) which helped me to solve some of the problems that exist in the published texts. The English translation, Shrill Cry of Simurgh, by W.M. Thackston, published in The Mystical & Visionary Treatises of Suhrawardī (London, 1982), is based on Nasr’s edition. Both translations were consulted but not used.
quoted from another chapter, sakīna is said to have been sent down not merely upon the Prophet, but to the hearts of the believers: “It is He who sent down the Shechina into the hearts of the believers” (XLVIII, 4). In the same chapter, there are other verses that are not quoted here by Suhrawrdī. In one of them God is said to have sent down the sakīna upon the believers and thereby given them victory over their enemy: “God was well pleased with the believers when they were swearing fealty to thee under the tree, and He knew what was in their hearts, so he sent down the Shechina upon them, and rewarded them with a nigh victory and many spoils to take” (XLVIII, 18). In the other verse, sakīna is again a divine aid said to have been sent down both to the Prophet and to the believers: “... then God sent down His Shechina upon His Messenger and believers” (XLVIII, 26).

I have taken the translation of these verses from A.J. Arberry’s The Koran Interpreted, and as we see he has not translated the Arabic word sakīna; instead, he has used the English loan-word ‘shechina’, borrowed from the Hebrew shĕkhīna. This word in English, as in Hebrew, primarily stands for the presence of God in the world as it is manifested in natural or supernatural phenomena. This seems to be the idea that Arberry had in mind when he was using the English word ‘schechina’ for the Arabic sakīna in the Qurʾān. Other scholars have also made some connections between the meaning of sakīna in the Qurʾān and hadith on the one hand, and the Jewish idea of shĕkhīna on the other. However, not all modern translators of the Qurʾān agree with Arberry. Marmaduke Pickthall, for example, following the opinion of most Moslem commentators, has translated this word, in all six verses, in his The Meaning of The Glorious Koran, as God’s “peace of reassurance”.

Moslem commentators of the Qurʾān have tended to treat sakīna as an Arabic word, derived from the root s-k-n, and interpreted it mostly to mean “calmness” or “tranquility” (ṭumaʾnīna). They have also associated it with “gravity” or “staidness” (waqār). Commentators disagreed as to the nature of the sakīna that is said (in Sura 11, verse 249) to have been in the Ark of the Israelites. In

2 Other Qurʾānic quotations are also taken from Arberry’s translation.
6 A major study on the idea of sakīna in Qurʾānic commentaries and in hadith literature is I. Goldziher’s article which appeared more than a hundred years ago, both in French and