

MUSLIM MYSTICS STRIFE WITH GOD

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by

Hellmut Ritter

The Qoran and every Islamic book begin with the words: "In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful." In this formula, which is put at the head of every book and every treatise, which is repeated every day hundreds of times at the beginning of any action of importance, the divine attributes of compassion and mercy are particularly emphasized and selected out of the great number of God's names and attributes which are known both from the Qoran and from Muhammedan tradition. It is one of the most positive and firmest convictions of every Muslim that God is compassionate and merciful.—But did the Muslims never doubt the mercy and compassion of God? What mankind has experienced, what happens every day in this world, God's own world, does this confirm the conviction that God is compassionate and merciful? Whence comes the evil that occurs in the world? And what is the answer to the more universal question: What is the real meaning of the universe and the things going on in it? Why has God created this strange world?

First, let us see what the dogmatic Muslim theologians have said about it.

If we disregard such sects as Shi'a, Kharijites and others, we may distinguish two big dogmatic schools in Islam: the Mu'tazila, whose doctrine was the official creed of the Abbasid empire from Ma'mūn until Mutawakkil, and the Orthodoxy of the *ahl as-sunna wal-jamā'a*, which after the fall of the Mu'tazila became the official doctrine of the Abbasid court in its place. The Mu'tazila is rationalistic and optimistic. Its adherents think they know on the authority of reason that God is just and cannot do evil. According to their doctrine, God is bound to ethical norms established by reason, and through these norms his potential arbitrariness is restricted. On the other hand, man is free and has free will to choose

¹ References to sources will be given in a forthcoming book about 'Aṭṭār.

his actions. The orthodox school puts the stress on the unrestricted omnipotence of God. According to them, God is not bound to norms established by reason. On the contrary, all the norms spring from his will and his command. He not only has created the world, but he is also continuously sustaining it by an always renewed act and process of creation. He also creates the actions of man, whose freedom is limited to his capacity of appropriating the actions created by God in the very moment of the action. Man is God's creature, his slave and property, and God may do with him whatever he likes.

And what is the answer of the Mu'tazila to the question, why God has created the world and, especially, man? One of the early masters of the Mu'tazila school, Abu l-Hudhail, says: He has created mankind for his own and for their benefit. For, if somebody creates a thing that is not profitable to any one, his work is idle and futile. Other Mu'tazilites, however, and also the Orthodox hold the view that God has created the world without any reason. Both in tradition and in the doctrines of some mystic schools, however, there are to be found several theories which try to show a reason for God's creative activity. There is a saying attributed to God Himself (*ḥadīth qudsī*): "I have created men and genii to serve Me." That is, the Lord creates for Himself the slaves who are to serve Him. According to another *ḥadīth qudsī*, often referred to by mystics, God has created the universe, in order that He, a hidden treasure, should be known; that is to say, out of the desire of manifesting Himself. Another theory of the mystics may be called the aesthetic-erotic theory. God loves His own beauty and creates man as a mirror, in which He may behold himself. And finally there is the well-known neoplatonic theory, according to which the world gradually emanates from the original One in a quasi-physical manner and returns to Him in the same way. There are some more theories; but today I want to tell you something about the views held by one of the greatest Persian mystics, the poet Faridaddīn 'Aṭṭār, who lived at the time of the last great Seljukide Sanjar and was killed by the Mongols in his native town of Nisapur, at the beginning of the 7th century of the hijra. He has left to posterity a great many epic poems most of which are stories within a story, a frame story with small tales in it. Many of the heroes of these small tales belong to the poorest and lowest social class: beggars, fools, and sufis, who mostly also belong to a low social stratum. In the poems of 'Aṭṭār, these poor people are allowed to speak for the first time in Persian poetry. Before the time of 'Aṭṭār, poetry was centered in the courts of the kings; it reflected the world and the interests of the emirs and sultans. There is no doubt that it is