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The Path of Blame: An Unusual Islamic Approach on the Way to Spiritual Perfection

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Abstract

In the complex landscape of Islamic mysticism developed from the 9th century onwards, an unusual trend emerged that is known as *Malāmatiyya* or the “People of Blame”. The particular discipline and teachings professed by this school on the way of spiritual perfection stressed out the necessity of a continuous self-control over the soul by exposing oneself to personal or public humiliation. This strange habit of *Malāmatiyya* adherents, who otherwise were very discreet people hiding their deep spiritual level, often took on some unusual forms. Some of them were mentioned in significant stories, anecdotes or sayings. All of these prove their capacity to perceive God’s presence in every aspects of life or, as Ibn Arabi says, in the secondary causes, also named by him “divine veils”. Therefore, beside their eccentricities the *Malāmatiyya* adepts kept their strong fidelity to Islamic tradition and faith and did not promote a spirituality estranged from a religious basis. Nowadays some New Age influences try to assimilate this particular branch and generally the Sufism as an expression of an universalistic spirituality of humanity and this misinterpretation makes it necessary to highlight its particular Islamic character.

Keywords:

Malāmatiyya, anecdotes, self-humiliation, “divine veils”, New Age

Beyond the legal-traditionalist expression or philosophical-rational approaches there is an ascetical-mystical dimension of Islam, whose unusual phenomenological manifestations may be difficult to understand. In this area of spiritual search, which is kept inside to the Islamic orthopraxy, sometimes the deeds might be considered strange thus casting a shadow of doubt over the rational abilities of those who perform them. This is why the general attitude of Islamic community towards the mystical ascetics who practiced them has been reticent and even scornful. As far as they are concerned, this last situation happened to be the most common and they actively looked for it by all means. We describe here the behavioural attitudes of these unusual Islamic spiritual men and we will try to discover the mystical motivation for their acts.

Although this kind of asceticism assumes the obedience to official dogma and it is rooted in Islamic tradition, it also promotes a peculiar spiritual thinking and a hidden discipline. This is why even if it imposes to its adherents the exterior observance of the practical rules of *Sharia*, it is not satisfied only by this exterior conformity and it goes further, by stressing self-renunciation, meekness and interior humility, as efficient methods to subjugate the lower desires which arise from the inner self. The target of these ascetics was the humbleness of the self - which was considered an obstacle that had to be overcome along the way to spiritual perfection.

The strategy used by these ascetics for maintaining their spiritual loftiness was not understood from outside so their behaviour was criticized because it often contradicted the usual social practices. But precisely their exposure to external reproof in front of society was a mean for deepening the understanding of religious duties according with the infinite wisdom of God, not restricting these only to an exterior application of Islamic rules.

I. The Path of Blame and its Guardians

The primary and formative history of Sufism, as troubled and complex as it is reflected in the writings of later scholars, was a fertile soil for the emergence of numerous types of mystical movements and orders. These had not, though, a well-defined and organized character up to the 12th century¹, so that the term Sufi, which designated all Muslim mystics, or the

¹ Remus Rus, *Istoria filosofiei islamice* [History of Islamic Philosophy], Editura Enciclopedică, București, 1994, p. 210.

identification of the Islamic mysticism with the *tasawwuf* (lit. to confess Sufism) was very foggy. Finally, the generalization became established, and this was due to the 10th century literature of compilation.

So, it is during this epoch that the general landscape of the Muslim mysticism witnessed the growth of extremely varied and interesting forms of spirituality. During the 9th-10th/3rd-4th centuries, in the town of Nīshāpūr which happened to be the capital of the Iranian province Khurasan, a new mystical trend was born². It was called “the path of blame” or “of the blameworthy” (from Arabic word *malāma* “to blame”) and it was a distinctive mystical direction. The adepts of this form of spirituality are *Malāmātiyya* (lit. “those who gather the culpability”, the “men of blame”, of “culpability” or of “disapproval”). Among the founders of this movement there are Hamdūn al Qassār (d. 271/844), Abu Hafs al Haddad al Naysābūrī (d. 265/879) and especially Abu Uthman al Hīrī (d. 298/910), who synthesized the teachings and methods of his predecessors and recorded them in writing, thus contributing to the spreading of this school and to a better knowledge of its peculiarities³. Originally, the so-called khurasanian spirituality looked like a counter-weight or even a reaction to the ecstatic mysticism of Sufism, known as Irakian or baghdadian.

In time, the two movements would become one, so that, later on, in literature, “the path of blame” would be considered as a mystical way of life or a type of spirituality belonging to Sufism⁴.

² The peculiar religious atmosphere from Khurasan, a pluralistic one, offered even the premises for organizing an interfaith dialogue between Muslims, Christians and Zoroastrians in the contemporary Mashhad city. This was realized in an assembly (*majles*) established by caliph Ma'mun (199-218/813-833), where the central personality was the eighth Shia Imam Ali al Reza (d. 202/818). So, the continuous contacts between the followers of different religions in Khurasan created not only the premises of some mutual influences in mystical area, but even the beginning of the first organized framework which conducted to the interfaith dialogue in the medieval period. Cf. Arhid. Caius CUȚARU, *Creștinism și islam în Evul Mediu: primele încercări de dialog în răsăritul creștin [Christianity and Islam in the Medieval Age: The First Attempts for an Interfaith Dialog in the Christian East]*, Editura Astra Museum, Sibiu, 2015, pp. 34-35.

³ Christopher MELCHERT, “Sufis and Competing Movements in Nīshāpūr”, in: *Iran* 39 (2001), pp. 238-239.

⁴ Sara SVIRI, “Hakīm Tirmidhī and the Malāmātī Movement in Early Sufism”, in: L. LEWISOHN (ed.), *The Heritage of Sufism. Classical Persian Sufism from its Origins to Rumi (700-1300)*, vol. 1, Oneworld Publication, Oxford, 1999, pp. 583-584; there are some opinions that this practice is not Muslim either in spirit or in theory, and it is pos-

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In itself, the *Malāmātiyya* is an extremely introverted attitude, a reaction to all the extroverted forms of reclusion and life in Sufi spirituality. If the followers of Sufism saw in the display of their spiritual powers a confirmation of holiness, and in the exterior acts such as ecstasy through dancing and singing an expression of their inner experiences, these manifestations being maintained till our days⁵, the Iranian *Malāmātiyya* fought against this mystical way of expression. Their public appearance was extremely reserved. They didn't wear any distinctive sign, not even the canonicals that brought so much fame to the Sufis⁶. As much as it was possible, their spiritual powers were kept secret and they avoided manifest ecstasy under any circumstance, as the interior life of every man, they said, had to be "a total secret between Master and servant".

Abd al-Malik ibn Muhammad Kharkushi in his *Kitab al Tahdhib al Asrar* lists the differences between Sufi and *Malāmātiyya* regarding the practical discipline of spiritual life:

"Among the differences between them and the Sufis is that the roots of the *Malāmātiyya* are built [his mixed metaphor] on knowledge (*ilm*), whereas the roots of the Sufis are built on the state (*hāl*). The *Malāmātiyya* encourage gain (*kasb*) and desire it, whereas the Sufis encourage leaving gain and are indifferent to it. The *Malāmātiyya* dislike publicity (*shuhra*) by way of clothing and making manifest patched garments (*muraqqa'āt*), whereas the Sufis incline to that. The *Malāmātiyya* repudiate

sible that it might be "borrowed from the Syrian Christians" (M. MOLÉ, *Les mystiques musulmans*, Paris, 1965, pp. 72-77 cf. C. E. BOSWORTH et al. (eds.), *Encyclopédie de l'Islam*, Tome VI, Nouvelle Édition, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1991, col. B, p. 223).

⁵ This is especially about *sāma*, mystical dance that symbolizes the divine order, "Sufis gathered in circles who turn around themselves in order to celebrate the One (divine unity)" cf. Habib SHARIFI, *Le soufisme. Mystique de l'Orient*, Grancher, Paris, 2000, p.133; for an interesting description of the dance, see O.M. BURKE, *Among the Dervishes*, The Octagon Press, London, 1973, pp. 49-50.

⁶ They recommend the use of clothes that do not differ from those of others, and the behaviour among people in the same manner as they do. All these are meant to try and remain faultless on the inside. A tradition of the Prophet is the very foundation of this: "God does not look at your external aspect, but at your heart and your intentions" cf. recueil de hadiths de SUYUTI, *Jāmi' al-saghūr*, II, 277, No. 1823 apud SULAMI, *La lucidité implacable (Épître des Hommes du Blâme - Risālat al-Malāmātiyya)*, trad. from Arabic, presented and adnotated by Roger Deladriere, Arléa, Paris, 1999, p. 85.

dancing and audition, crying out and ecstasy in the way one finds among the Sufis”⁷.

A significant anecdote illustrates the contrast between a Sufi’s and a *malāmātī*’s positions regarding the open discussions about mystical efforts. The essential explanation given by Ibn Munazil, a known *malāmātī* ascet, clarifies his reserved attitude toward the repeated invitations for some spiritual discussions made to him and his friends by famous baghdadian sufi Abu Al Qasim al Junayd and it produces a powerful effect on the latter. The story exemplifies thus how the strange impoliteness to refuse the meeting with a great *shaykh* has in fact a profound logic and is the hidden proof of a high mystical level⁸.

In his work called *Risālat al-Malāmātīyya* (“The Letter of the Men of Blame”), Sheik Abu’ Abd al-Rahmān al-Sulamī⁹ speaks about three categories of masters in what the sciences and the spiritual stages are concerned. The first category is represented by theologians and jurists who take care of the “exterior aspect of Islam”, more exactly, they are “the guardians of foundations of Law and of the principles of Religion”¹⁰. The second category includes those who were granted by God the privilege of spiritual knowledge, this holy endeavour being for them the only purpose and reason for living. It makes them think about all the actions of their

⁷ Christopher MELCHERT, “Khargūshī, Tahdhīb al-asrār”, in: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 73, 1 (2010), pp. 35-36.

⁸ “«Beautiful speech is like excellent food: it goes into a man’s mouth and the surplus goes out. The same applies to mystical knowledge (*ilm al-marifa*): God throws the best [piece of knowledge] in the [interior of] someone. He chooses, then what comes out through his tongue and what God makes him express is its worst [part]. I would rather forego the chance of meeting al Junayd than be tricked into receiving from him the worst bit, while the best remains with him». When al Junayd heard the motivation of the refusal burst out weeping, almost losing his consciousness and was silent the entire visit”. Sara SVIRI, “The Early Mystical Schools of Baghdad and Nīshāpūr”, in: *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 30, 2005, p. 464.

⁹ Sheik Abu’ Abd al-Rahman al Sulamī de Nīshāpūr (937/325-1021/412) a descendant and member of a noble Persian family, was the nephew of Muhammad ibn al-Husayn ibn Mussa, who was his grandfather on the mother’s side. This was the disciple of Abu Uthman al-Hūrī, the third *Malāmātīyya* master. Although this was not his only work, *Risalat al-Malāmātīyya* has special value as it is the only source of typological and historical reconstruction of this mystical movement. Another well-known work is *Tabaqāt al-Sufiyya* (The Sufi Orders).

¹⁰ SULAMĪ, *La lucidité implacable*, p. 27.

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lives exclusively as related to God. Consequently, they are considered as an “elite of the elite”. This is proved by the charismas they are endowed with and their ascetic way of life. For that reason, they are also called “the men of the knowledge of God”¹¹.

There is also the third category, the highest one. It is represented by the people who were endowed by God with the exceptional favour of being close to Him, or, even more, permanently united with Him. They become in this way inseparable from God, as the level they acceded to is rarely to be lost. Paradoxically, these saints do not reveal their spiritual status, but camouflage it with an exterior appearance which does not give any hint on their inner depth; they don’t talk about the powers they have been endowed with and avoid being recognized in public¹².

But what is the reason for such an attitude? And how far can it go?

II. A Strategy for Disciplining the Ego

The essence or the main characteristic of the *Malāmātiyy* away is that it keeps the soul or spirit in a state of continuous humility. And this is not based on ethical or moral reasons, but on an accurate understanding of the spiritual nature¹³. The self or the human ego (*al nafs*), “a persistent enjoiner of evil” (*Sura Yusuf* 53), directs most of his powers towards the satisfaction of its own lusts, which would otherwise be directed toward the inner growth and spiritual fulfillment of the believer. The antidote offered

¹¹ SULAMI, *La lucidité implacable*, p. 28.

¹² “I have once asked a *malāmāti*: «Why don’t you come to the *sāma* meetings?» – «This does not happen», he answered, «not because we don’t like them or disapprove of them, but because we are afraid that they might reveal our inner “states” that we keep secret, which would be very serious damage»” cf. SULAMI, *La lucidité implacable*, p. 67.

¹³ Allah created the man and gave him “the soul of life (*ruh*) and spirit (*nafs*)”. If *ruh* is used with the meaning of soul or spirit, *nafs* is the animal spirit, “the lowest spiritual part... corresponding to the notion of body from the Christian mysticism, the sinful body, or the human one, ego” (cf. Remus RUS, “Concepția despre om în marile religii” [The Conception of Man in the Great Religions], in: *Glasul Bisericii*, XXXVII (1978) 1-2, p. 783); The exaggerations in this direction of *Malāmātiyya* account for the accusation of ontological dualism which seems to have been brought against them, as the soul was seen almost as a reality opposed to God. Cf. C. E. BOSWORTH et al. (eds.), *Encyclopédie de l’Islam*, p. 218, col. B.

by the ascetic practice is not enough, as it may lead to a certain degree of self-content or even pride. The causes for this are varied, as they go from considering ascetism as a reason in itself or as a means to reaching a certain spiritual state, or even the desire to be respected by the society. This is why, one of *Malāmātiyya* principles is to reject the satisfaction produced by obedience acts to God “as a lethal poison”¹⁴.

The mystics of Nīshāpūr adopted, consequently, a method of despising the ego (*alnafṣ*) and of making it undergo all kinds of interior and exterior humiliations. This became in the history of Muslim mysticism the syntality of their order or of their school. Meekness and the despise of the self is sought within the exterior environment, but is also provoked inwardly by the *malāmāti* ascetic himself. And this is done “not only according to whatever is considered worthy of despise according to the social, religious and ethical standards, but also – and first of all – according with the disdain of whatever is considered as worthy of respect according to these standards in the eyes of the exterior society”¹⁵. From here we draw the conclusion that the camouflage of the spiritual status of a *malāmāti* did not involve exclusively a prudent public behaviour. Sometimes, they put up quite a nasty and bizarre behaviour. The ultimate reason for these contradictory kinds of behaviour is one and only: reaching self-control, which enabled one to receive with equal indifference the praises or despise that had been directed towards him¹⁶.

A *malāmāti* was able to behave either in a reclusive manner or ostentatiously, depending on the situation, and the verdict of the society was of no interest to him¹⁷. Sometimes, his doings appear completely strange and are blamed by the people, who judge them according to the

¹⁴ SULAMĪ, *La lucidité implacable*, p. 70.

¹⁵ Sara SVIRI, “Hakim Tirmidhī and the Malāmātī...”, p. 89.

¹⁶ “Now blame is of three kinds: it may result (1) from following the right way (*malamat-i rast raftan*), or (2) from an intentional act (*malamat-i qasd kardan*), or (3) from abandonment of the law (*malamat-i tark kardan*)” in Ali B. Uthman Al-Jullabi AL-HUJWIRI, *Kashf al-Mahjub*, trad. by R. A. Nicholson, Vol. XVII, E. J. Brill, Leyden, 1911, p. 63.

¹⁷ Al Hujwiri provides a quranic verse arguing in favor of the *Malāmātiyya* behaviour: “They will fight in the way of Allah and will not fear the reproach of any reproacher This is the bounty of Allah, He gives it whom He pleases. And Allah is All-embracing, All Knowing” (Sura *Al Mā’ida*, V, 54b).

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criteria of human reason and social prejudice, criticizing them and what they do because they do not see their acts as coming from God¹⁸.

There are many anecdotes and words of wisdom, either anonymous or not, more or less metaphorical, regarding these mystics. These stories, also, mirror the collision between them and the common people or between *Malāmatiyya* and the Sufi mystics.

These spiritual masters are not always identified by name, as even in the *Risalat al-Malāmatiyya*, Sulamī often refers to what “a *malāmati*” said, without quoting the name¹⁹. This was a suggestion of the anonymity assumed by these people. Then, the fact that the charismas with which they were endowed are sometimes manifested abruptly and without any clear reason, makes a lot of the Sufi literature speak about “fools” (whose way of expressing themselves was evidently that put up by *malāmati*).

III. A Continuous Unification with God

An analysis of *Malāmatiyya* behaviour provides us with a complex image of the mystic strategy of these Islamic saints. All their acts could seem strange at a first glance, but if there are evaluated in the context of a mind aware of God’s proximity they would be understood as tremendous. In fact, the reactions of these ascetics are divine judgements in some existential situations appearing as common for the other people who don’t recognize them as such, or for those Sufi mystics too proud to take notice and who ignore them. While acting so, they authors keep veiled their ecstatic lives their and continuous binding with God, but become proclaimers of His presence in all the aspects of human life.

Exposing themselves to the disdain of society all the time had a profound meaning for their spiritual lives. This is why they should not be considered spectacular exhibitors of their particular spiritual discipline but ascetics who tried to perfect themselves by deepening the ultimate meaning of every gesture of their life.

¹⁸ William C. CHITTICK, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1989, p. 375.

¹⁹ SULAMĪ, *La lucidité implacable*, pp. 51, 69, 76.

In *Kashf al-Mahjub*²⁰, Ali B. ‘Uthman al-Jullabi Al-Hujwiri has a story whose protagonist is Abu Yazid al Bistāmi²¹. Once, when he entered the town of Rayy on his way to Hijaz, the crowds attracted by the fame of the personality who was passing through their town came to see him. This distracted him from his thoughts focused on God. Then, to everyone’s amazement, he calmly started to eat a loaf of bread as soon as he reached the bazaar, although it was the midst of Ramadan. This made all the curious ones go away in disdain. “You see! said he with irony to his followers, *as soon as I perform a single article of the law, they reject me*” (during the trip, fasting is not compulsory).

Often, some attitudes contrary to classic images of holiness may be expressed in a really nonconformist way. A lot of *Malāmātiyya* ascetics hid “their real and virtuous inner life, very deep at times, under the eccentric and provocative appearances, so that they could be considered vicious, drunkard, sensual, libertine, weird and, consequently, they would be despised and rejected by the society [...] they didn’t mind the common opinion, as their only target was to be absorbed by God”²².

Their strange acts do not have to be regarded as a sign of isolation from society or of judgment on it, but of humiliation of the self. This is the very reason for which, when despised, a *malāmāti* feels happy and satisfied, and he is even looking for the opportunity to expose himself as an awkward and absurd man, a situation which delights him in a spiritual sense.

Ali B. ‘Uthman al-Jullabi mentions other examples of self humiliation for inducing the experience of release from any kind of egotatry. Ibrāhīm

²⁰ Sheikh Ali B. ‘Uthman al-Jullabi Al-Hujwiri, known also as Data Ganj Baksh was one of the most important Sufi masters. He was a true “globetrotter”, as he travelled through Syria, Iran, Irak, Azerbaidjan, Transoxania, etc. and he reached India; he knew some of the most important sheiks of his time. *Kashf al-Mahjub* is seen as the most important Persian book on Sufism. Divided in 25 chapters, consisting of questions and answers, it tackles issues such as: knowledge, poverty, Sufism, the Imams, different Sufi doctrines. A chapter is about *malāmāti*. See note 15.

²¹ Abu Yazid Tayfur al-Bistāmi (d. 838/234) is known as “the commander” (unlike another Tayfur Bistāmi who is known as “the minor”) and is a forerunner of the “Men of Blame” because of his nonconformist behaviour and speech, which triggered his exile from Bistām, his native town.

²² Jean CHÉVALIER, *Sufismul*, Herald, Bucureşti, 2002, p. 120. This behaviour caused them to be mistaken for the Kallandariyya order.

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ibn Ad'ham²³, asked if he had ever reached a superior level of devotional experience, said:

“Yes, twice; on one occasion I was on a ship where nobody knew me. I was clad in common clothes and my hair was long, and my guise was such that all the people in the ship mocked and laughed at me. Among them was a buffoon, who was always coming and pulling my hair and tearing it out, and treating me contumely after the manner of his kind. At that time I felt entirely satisfied, and rejoiced in my garb. My joy reached its height when the buffoon rose from his place and *super me minxit*. On the second occasion I arrived at a village in heavy rain, which had soaked the patched frock on my body, and I was overcome by the wintry cold. I went to a mosque, but was refused admittance. The same thing happened at three other mosques where I sought shelter. In despair, as the cold had reached my heart, I got to a public bath, undressed and put my clothes on the stove. The smoke enveloped me and blackened my clothes and my face. Then also I felt entirely satisfied”²⁴.

Equally eloquent is another example, an experience of Al-Hujwiri himself:

“Once upon a time, I, Ali B. ‘Uthman al-Jullabi, found myself in difficulty. After many devotional exercises undertaken in the hope of clearing it away, I headed - as I had done successfully on a former occasion - for the tomb of Abu Yazid, and stayed beside it for a space of three months, performing every day three ablutions and thirty purifications in the hope that my difficulty might be removed. It was not, however; so I departed and journeyed towards Khurasan. One night I arrived at a village in that country where there was a convent (*khanaqah*) inhabited by a number of aspirants to Sufism. *I was wearing a dark-blue frock,*

²³ Ibrāhīm ibn Ad'ham (d. 163/779-80) appreciated as “the first known Muslim mystic” is one of the forerunners of the Khurasan school; in its doctrine are present some of his ideas, developed by his followers. He died in exile in Syria.

²⁴ Ali B. 'Uthman al-Jullabi AL-HUJWIRI, *Kasf al-Mahjub*, p. 68.

as prescribed by the *Sunna* (for travellers); but I had nothing of the regular Sufi's regular equipment (*alat-i ahl-i rasm*), except a staff and a leathern water-bottle. I appeared very contemptible in the eyes of these Sufis, who didn't know me. They regarded only my external habit and told to one another: «This fellow is not one of us». And so in truth it was: I wasn't one of them, but I had to pass the night in that place. They lodged me on a roof, while they themselves went up to a roof above mine, and set before me dry bread which had turned green, while I was drawing into my nostrils the savour of the viands with which they regaled themselves. All the time they were addressing derisive remarks to me from the roof. When they finished the food, they began to pelt me with the skins of the melons which they had eaten by way of showing how pleased they were with themselves and how lightly they thought of me. I said in my heart: 'O Lord God, were it not that they are wearing the dress of Thy friends, I would not have borne this from them'. And the more they scoffed at me, the more glad became my heart, so that the endurance of this burden was the means of delivering me from difficulty which I have mentioned; and forthwith I perceived why the Shaykhs have always given fools leave to associate with them and for what reason they submit to their annoyance"²⁵.

The assuming of a beggar condition as a means of self humiliation is observed as a commandment of the master and integrated in the *Malāmatiyya* ideas and opinions about charity²⁶.

²⁵ Ali B. 'Uthman al-Jullabi AL-HUJWIRI, *Kasf al-Mahjub*, p. 69.

²⁶ An anecdote explains how the begging practice was assumed in the *Malāmatiyya* discipline of self-humiliation: "We entered Mecca with Ibrāhīm ibn Ad'ham and lo, there was Shaqīq al-Balkhī, who had made the pilgrimage in that year. We met to one side of the circumambulation. Ibrāhīm said to Shaqīq, «Where have you put down your roof?» He said, «We have put down our root here: that when provision comes our way, we eat, whereas if it is denied us, we have patience». Ibrāhīm said: «This is how the dogs of Balkh behave». Shaqīq said to him: «So where have you put down your roof?». He said: «We have put down our root here: that when provision comes our way, we prefer (others to ourselves), whereas if it is denied us, we give thanks and praise». Shaqīq got up, then sat down before Ibrāhīm and said, «Teacher (*ustādh*), you are our teacher»". ABŪNU'AYM, *Hilyat al-awliyā'* (10 vols.), Maktabat al-Khānjī, Cairo, 1352–7/1932–8, vol. 8: pp. 37–38 cf. Christopher MELCHERT, "Khargūshī, Tahdhīb

“My grandfather Ibn Nujayd, said Sulamī, told what Abu Muhammad al-Jawni, an apprentice of Abu Hafṣ had confessed²⁷; he was given that command: «Go to the bazaar in order to find means of existence, but whatever you earn for your food must be given to the poor and you must beg in front of the people!» Al-Jawni added: «But, whenever I had asked charity they used to say:«See, this man is insatiable and greedy! He works all day and he also begs for charity!» This went on until they realized that that thing had been ordered by Abu Hafṣ, and from that moment on they started to give me charity. After I had lived that experience, Abu Hafṣ told me to give up this way of life, which I have done”²⁸.

As we can see, their strategy followed only a strictly disciplinary goal and did not try to impose a reclusive lifestyle as a specific way to perfection.

There are a lot of suggestive stories about the lives of these saints and their sayings which show how they understood to conform their lives with the commandments of Sunna and Quran in the light of their ascetical and philosophical practices.

Generally, these anecdotes record the reaction of *Malāmātiyya* in front of the inadequate aspects of life which go unnoticed by the other people. Exposing the hidden self discipline, the attitude against falsehood in society, the realistic knowledge of essence of things and sometimes their mysterious foresight of events, all these stories reveal in fact the ability of these ascets to live in a continuous and profound union with God, without

al-asrār”, p. 37. This was a consequence of a distinct understanding of *tawakkul* (reliance on or trust in God) by *Malāmātiyya* which was allowing a gain from licit and odd activities unlike the other tendency which rejected any kind of gain from people, relying only on the divine protection. The last direction became predominant in Sufi environment which gradual absorbed *Malāmātiyya*. Christopher MELCHERT, “Sufis and Competing Movements in Nishapur”, p. 237.

²⁷ Abu Hafṣ of Nīshāpūr (m.879/265) known also as the “ironsmith”, because of the tradition which talks about him putting his hand in a forge, after which the hand remained intact. He was close to Hamdūn al-Qassār, some of the founders of the “way of the scorn”.

²⁸ SULAMĪ, *La lucidité implacable*, p. 61.

ignoring or disrespecting the concrete existence in a social environment.

For example, the repentance for personal sins, a reflection asked traditionally from any pilgrim travelling to a sacred place, it is evaluated in a mystical sense by a *malāmati*.

“Once Sofyan was travelling to Mecca in a litter. A companion was with him, and Sofyan wept all the way. «Do you weep out of fear for your sins?» asked his friend. Sofyan stretched out his hand and plucked some stubble. «My sins are many», he replied. «Yet though my sins are many, they mean no more to me than this handful of stubble. What makes me afraid is whether the faith I am offering is really faith or not»²⁹.

The dialogue stresses that it is not the juridical evaluation of sins, in fact an emotional effusion which cannot change things, but rather an existential self criticism of one’s own faith in God must be the imperative feeling experienced by the pilgrim on the way to the roots of his faith.

Along the same line, a shocking method of self-pride control is used by another ascetic: “Beshr possessed seven bookcases of volumes on Traditions. He buried them all in the ground, and did not transmit them. «The reason I do not transmit Traditions», he explained, «is that I perceive in myself a lust to do so. If I perceive in my heart a lust to keep silence, then I will transmit them»³⁰. Even if this attitude could scandalize a conservative view, in fact it doesn’t mean a desecration of the Tradition itself but of the illusory feeling of one’s own sacred authority generated in a *muhaddith* by the narration of the *ahadith*.

On the contrary, a defensive tactic is used against the external challenges. The angry reactions are dissimulated by an excessively polite behaviour toward other people and also accompanied by self incrimination in front of God for any possible mistake made.

“«When the master is angry with you, do you know it?» someone asked Tirmidhi’s family. «We know», they replied. «Whenever he is vexed with us, that day he is even kinder to us than usual.

²⁹ Farid al-Din ATTAR, *Muslim Saints and Mystics: Episodes from the Tadhkirat al-Auliya’ (Memorial of the Saints)*, trad. A. J. Arberry, Omphaloskepsis, 2000, p. 169.

³⁰ Farid al-Din ATTAR, *Muslim Saints...*, p. 94.

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He takes neither bread nor water, and weeps and supplicates, saying: O God, in what did I vex Thee, that Thou hast provoked them against me? O God, I repent; restore them to rectitude. So we know, and repent, to deliver the master out of his affliction»³¹.

Therefore, a benevolent attitude as a response to the adverse environment is used as a method for improving the personal patience and accepted as penalty for sins and humiliation of the ego.

However there is a different attitude towards society relating to human changeable conventions on the objective virtues and concepts. A critical reaction to the misplaced solidarity of people at a funeral service unveils the false human piety and the general hypocrisy. "A neighbour of Sofyan's died, and Sofyan went out to pray at his funeral. After that he heard people saying: «He was a good man». «If I had known that other men approved of him», said Sofyan, «I would never have taken part in his funeral. Unless a man is a hypocrite, the others do not approve of him!»³². The manipulation of justice, a cardinal principle of faith, depending on emotional contexts is reported as a proof of human unstable behaviour incompatible with a mind permanently unified with God.

Another story illustrates in a symbolic scene, more exactly the refusal to adapt the wearing of clothes to the rules of exterior aestheticism only because of the social norms, how some mystic condemns the formalist mentality which restricts the relation with God only to a ritual level. "One day Sofyan put on his clothes all awry. When this was pointed out to him, he was on the point of adjusting them, but then abstained. «I put on this shirt for God's sake», he said. «I do not wish to change it for the sake of men»³³. The exterior image of the awry garments which is rated by other people as a scandalous one, even if it is enough to be considered as decent by Islamic rules, is a symbolic mirror of themselves and of their scant connection with God.

The attempt to awaken the spirit of solidarity and sacrifice in the souls of fellows generates cryptic gestures which have an apparently violent manifestation. "When Shebli was confined in chains a group of his companions one day went to visit him. «Who are you?» he cried. «Your

³¹ Farid al-Din ATTAR, *Muslim Saints...*, p. 332.

³² Farid al-Din ATTAR, *Muslim Saints...*, p. 167.

³³ Farid al-Din ATTAR, *Muslim Saints...*, p. 168.

friends», they told him. He at once began to throw stones at them, and they all fled. «Liars!» he shouted. «Do friends run away from their friend because of a few stones? This proves that you are friends of yourselves, not of me!»³⁴. This scene denounces in fact, in the casual concern for the difficult situation of a friend, the inability of people to be all the times and all circumstances friends with God. Through a violent gesture a mystic who always feels the closeness of God shows that friendship is not a vicinity, but an intimacy, it is more than a temporary visit to a friend, or a circumstantial spiritual state (*hal*) as it is practiced in the Sufi discipline, but a continuous, habitual lifestyle.

The criticism of using the religious landmarks as pretexts or intermediary items for avoiding a direct relation of the soul with God is expressed in a strange but suggestive act.

“Once Shebli was seen running with a burning coal in his hand. «Where are you going?» they asked. «I am running to set fire to the Kaaba», he answered, «so that men may henceforward care only for the Lord of the Kaaba». On another occasion he was holding in his hand a piece of wood alight at both ends. «What are you going to do?» he was asked. «I am going to set Hell on fire with one end and Paradise with the other», he replied, «so that men may concern themselves only with God»³⁵.

This kind of reaction stresses out that the human concern with self-preservation dominates people even when they invoke the religious realities and the fundamental spiritual dimensions. The thoughts of Paradise, Hell or Kaaba are tools for reflecting on spiritual realms and on God, but they are often mistaken and become some false idols which replace their Creator. The perception of the unseen realities endows them with a great ability to interpret mysterious images, signs or visions which are not perceivable or understandable by the others. “Once Dawud was seen running to prayer. «What is the hurry?» he was asked. «This army at the gates of the city», he replied. «They are waiting for me». «Which army?» they exclaimed. «The men of the tombs», he replied³⁶. Also, the proximity with God allow them

³⁴ Farid al-Din ATTAR, *Muslim Saints...*, p. 382.

³⁵ Farid al-Din ATTAR, *Muslim Saints...*, p. 383.

³⁶ Farid al-Din ATTAR, *Muslim Saints...*, p. 181.

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to understand the premonitory signs and to communicate at a spiritual level with other mystics, this spiritual liaison being unapproachable for the others. “One day Sahl was seated in the mosque when a pigeon dropped to the ground, exhausted by the heat. «Shah-e Kermani has died», remarked Sahl. When they looked into the matter, it proved to be exactly as Sahl said”³⁷.

More than this, the gift of perceiving the divine reality and its manifestations endow mystics with the power to unveil revelations among fellows and to prompt them to reflect on what it means to partake of the divine realm.

“One day Nuri saw a man twirling his moustaches while at prayer. «Take your hand away from the moustaches of God», he cried. These words were reported to the caliph. The lawyers declared unanimously that by uttering them Nuri had lapsed into infidelity. He was haled before the caliph. «Did you speak those words?» the caliph demanded. «Yes», Nuri replied. «Why did you say them?» asked the caliph. «To whom does the servant of God belong?» countered Nuri. «To God», answered the caliph. «And to whom did the moustaches belong?» Nuri pursued. «To Him to whom the servant belonged», concluded the caliph. «Praise be to God, who preserved me from slaying him», he afterwards added. Abu ‘l-Hosain al-Nuri «I saw a light gleaming in the Unseen», said Nuri. «I gazed at it continually, until the time came when I had wholly become that light»³⁸.

All these acts are not understandable by uninitiated persons, who do not always understand the deep spiritual need that lays behind such foolish deeds, and who assess them only by their exterior form. On the contrary, in spite of the worldly hypocrisy and conforming to his creed for a spiritual perfection, the principle of such a *malāmati* is to hide what is good inside him and to display only what is evil³⁹.

Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), “the greatest master” (*shaikh al akbar*), offers an explanation for the unusual behaviour of these ascetics which, as it was described, often transcends the level of ethical dimension and the common

³⁷ Farid al-Din ATTAR, *Muslim Saints...*, p. 204.

³⁸ Farid al-Din ATTAR, *Muslim Saints...*, p. 305.

³⁹ SULAMI, *La lucidité implacable*, p. 67.

logical exigencies. On the one hand, a *malāmati* knows that God acts permanently in the world in the secondary causes and that these causes, named by him “divine veils”, don’t act by themselves, but they are a mask of the Only One. Although *Malāmatiyya* recognize Him in all things, they don’t associate these secondary causes with God in a idolatrous way (*shirk*) as the common people do. By so doing the common people become heretics, remaining forever in the realm of Nature. On the other hand, the determination of *Malāmatiyya* to free themselves from the causes, to torn the veil under which God hides the mystery of His presence, marks the difference between them and Sufis. This is because the persons who place the secondary causes where their Establisher- the Real one - is established “in fact call their Establisher stupid and remain ignorant of His measures”. Therefore, the People of Blame place the secondary causes in their places, but they do not depend upon them⁴⁰. Therefore, Ibn Arabi portrayed them this way:

“These are the princes of the men of calling, and their imam, the supreme leader of this world is one of them: and this is Mahomed, the one sent by God. They are the wise men who place each thing where they should be. They speak up for secondary causes where there is a need to and deny them where they need to be denied. This is why they are clean, and they hide among people. Among them the theophany is perpetual”⁴¹.

Their apparently unjustified deeds could be judged otherwise if they weren’t classified in a simplistic manner as bad, fool or irrational acts⁴². If these apparently strange manifestations are placed in the context of the entire spiritual discipline and mentality of *Malāmatiyya* ascetics, they could be clearly understood as expressing the authentic coexistence of

⁴⁰ William C. CHITTICK, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge...*, p. 373.

⁴¹ IBN ARABI, *Al-futuhat al-makkiyya*, Bullāq, 1329h. (4 vol.), in: Michael CHODKIEWICZ, *Le sceau des saints. Prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine Ibn Arabi*, Gallimard, 1986, p. 137.

⁴² “They only see them as coming from him upon whose hand they become manifest. So they blame and criticize the acts. But were the covering to be removed and were they to see that the acts belong to God, no blame would attach to him upon whose hands they appeared. In this state all those acts would be noble and good” in William C. CHITTICK, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge...*, p. 375.

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God with all His creatural manifestations. This is the reason for which even if these deeds are apparently bewildering or outraging, they are in a deep agreement with the divine Reason and the will of Allah, whose tools are the *Malāmātiyya*.

IV. Genuinely Following Sunna and Quran

If we evaluate the compliance of *Malāmātiyya* ascetic discipline with the rules of Islamic code we find, as it was mentioned, some contrasting attitudes. Sometimes these were misinterpreted as proofs of an universalistic religious conscience which surpasses the borders of the Islamic behaviour norms and it could be inscribed in a spiritual vision risen above all the particular religions. This approach has been encouraged by some known proponents who “over emphasized the universalistic aspects of Sufism at the expense of its specifically Muslim character” (G. J. Gurdjieff, Idries Shah, J. G. Benett)⁴³. Currently, the hypothesis is invoked from some perspectives to argue an inserting of *Malāmātiyya* view and generally of the Sufi discipline in a New Age spiritualist trend.

The esoteric (*batin*) and exoteric (*zahir*) dimensions of Islamic religion, both of them inseparable parts of the same divine reality, are often referred to, in order to account for the deep binding between *Sharia* law and Sufi mysticism. Even if the importance of a balanced relation between them is stressed, the so named exoteric dimension is emphasized as having a preeminence on the way to attaining the spiritual core of religion, in the view of the so-called perennialist scholars (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Martin Lings)⁴⁴. This traditionalist view considers that esoterism cannot exist without exoterism and only together they can constitute the complete orthodoxy and orthopraxy. A theoretical separation of the spiritual Sufi practitioner by the discipline of his particular mystical order and observance of Islamic rules is tantamount with the cancelling of religious legitimacy.

⁴³ Samuel Bendeck SOTILOS, “Sufism and the Way of Blame: Sacred Sources of a Hidden Psychology by Yannis Toussulis, Foreword by Robert Abdul Hayy Darr, Quest Book, 2011”, p. 187 [http://www.sacredweb.com/online_articles/sw27_sotillos.pdf] (20/07/2019).

⁴⁴ Samuel Bendeck SOTILOS, “Sufism and the Way of Blame...” p. 181.

In analyzing *Malāmātiyya* discipline and their sometimes inexplicable acts, we can't find any transgression against the *tariqa* discipline or *Sharia* religious rules. On the contrary, their inexplicable behavioural ways possessed an internal logic. However, the blame taken over themselves in every aspect of life was perceived as an allusive reproach towards the ethics of society and the *Malāmātiyya* ascetics were seen as real religious dissidents. In fact, they didn't try to offer a new model for a social or religious behaviour but only followed a particular way towards internal spiritual perfection which was circumscribed to Islamic rules even if it was perceived from outside as an eccentric one⁴⁵. They were admired for the exceptional virtues of discretion and humbleness and for their admirable mystical effort to achieve the metamorphosis of lower desires and thoughts into pious facts and wise sayings.

As Sulamī mentions, the *tasawwuf* tradition of Khurasan was expressed around three sciences or lines of discipline: servitude, gnosis and spiritual guidance or authority⁴⁶. All of these presupposed a total integration of ascetics into the ethos of Islamic life and compliance with Sunna having the continuous awareness of God's presence in every act of their life. Often, the spiritual sayings about the importance of a balanced religious behaviour, from the disciplinary perspective of *Malāmātiyya* order, stress out the value of respecting Sunna and not simply cultivating eccentricities. For example:

“Those who move away from Sunna are not among Sufi because the Prophet said: «The one who will adhere to Sunna while my community dives in corruption is as one who has in his hand a burning coal. The one whose manners and behaviour are not conform to Quran and Sunna he is not a Sufi. The one whose conduct, manner of eating, dressing, sitting down, standing up, getting up, talking and behaving in a environment is diverged by those of his masters is not a Sufi. The one who will adhere to Sunna while my community dives in corruption is like a fighter on the way of God»⁴⁷.

⁴⁵ Samuel Bendeck SOTILOS, “Sufism and the Way of Blame...” p. 191.

⁴⁶ Jean-Jacques THIBON, “Les voies des Hommes sincères parmi les Soufis”, introd. et trad. du texte de SULAMĪ *Manāhij al-sādiqīn*, in: *La règle d'Abraham*, No. 34, 2012, Milan, Archè, p. 60.

⁴⁷ Jean-Jacques THIBON, “Les voies des Hommes sincères ...”, p. 47.

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However, their way to spiritual perfection presupposed the assuming of a discipline which followed in such a profound manner Sunna and Quranic teachings that it surpassed common people's ability to understand. Some sayings state the principles of the ascetic behaviour followed by the adepts of *Malāmātiyya* order: "On the Day of Judgment, every servant has to answer four questions: how he spent his life, what he did in his youth, how he earned his money and how he spent it, and how he put his knowledge to good use. Another statement of a Sufi mentions: «For a sufi the food is that of a sick and his rest that of a shipwrecked»⁴⁸.

Thus, the program of their life was deeply bound by the responsibilities of their religion, but this was made in such an authentic and complex way that it was not recognized by other people and it seemed more like a strange manifestation. This is why their thought and vision were all the time in permanent contact with God, impossible to be imitated by people who simply follow only their formal religious or spiritual duties.

V. Conclusions

The *Malāmātiyya* movement as one of the first and genuine Sufi tendencies developed an original discipline which became a peculiarity of its order. Concretely, it introduced a psychological approach on the way to spiritual perfection, making the continuous control over the human ego (*al nafs*) its main concern. This demarche was made by *Malāmātiyya* adherents both in a negative manner, by a continuous blame of the mental lust potentialities, and also in a positive way by cultivating awareness of God's proximity observed in every moment in all the aspects of life. The anecdotes about the lives and acts of *Malāmātiyya* adepts illustrate a fascinating mystical behaviour which includes spectacular manifestations, cryptic gestures and foresights.

Nowadays the Sufi discipline, teachings and thought are often invoked from a New Age perspective to argue that in Islam, as also in the other religions, there is a spirituality distinct from religion, legal norms and traditional practices. However, there are a lot of elements which confirm the strong rooting of *Malāmātiyya* spirituality in the religious dogmas, practices and ethos, showing the balance between the visible (*zahir*) and the hidden (*batin*) dimension of Islam.

⁴⁸ Jean-Jacques THIBON, "Les voies des Hommes sincères ...", pp. 34-35.