Muhammad Hasan ʻAskari

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Three Essays

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Translated by

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Askari's "Noun" and Tasavvuf
(Translator's Note)

I⊤ ɪs unfortunate that the intellectual legacy of Muḥammad Ḥasan ʿAskarī (1919–78) has received little or no attention from Urdu scholars in the West. But for those whose engagement with Urdu literature does not stop with the nineteenth century, in other words, with Mīr and Ghālib, ʿAskarī's is not a presence easily ignored. (And even in regard to Mīr and Ghālib, some of the most perceptive and truly trail-blazing critical appraisal has come from ʿAskarī and our own contemporary Shamsuʾr-Raḥmān Fārūqī.) He was a professor of English, self-taught in French well enough to read large quantities of French literature in the original and correspond with many French writers and thinkers, a significant short-story writer who approached his art with particular sensitivity to its form, but, above all, he was a critic with the keenest intellect. His essays, totaling well over 1000 pages, range over a variety of concerns: criticism of poetry and fiction, creative writers of both East and West, and reflections on art, architecture, philosophy, Marxism, psychology, and music. In all this, his profound understanding of both Western and Eastern cultures is in evidence everywhere, but even more, their subtle and subterranean interplay. All his work ultimately seeks to inform the Urdu reader of the crucial relation language has to the structure of thought. Reading ʿAskarī is doubly rewarding, not just for his ideas, but also for his example of how to think and write. In their particular mode of being, these essays are nothing less than a challenge, thrown boldly and—if one can find one's way out of the author's rather pointed, even harsh, but seldom insulting use of irony—compassionately, urging the contemporary South Asian reader to pause and take stock of himself or herself, in order to reconnect with their cultural wellsprings.

"Compassion" is not an attribute that comes easily to mind when one thinks of ʿAskarī, at least not to the minds of many Urdu readers. To

them he was a misanthrope *par excellence*, full of himself, interested in knocking the hat off of everyone's head—and then the usual clichéd psychobabble: sexually frustrated, etc., etc. But he *was* compassionate, in his concern for the intellectual well-being of his people. He couldn't, of course, address this feeling of concern to any particular existent—Zaid, 'Amr, or Bakr—but only to existence as a whole. A firm believer in the legacy of Taṣavvuf, he knew well that all Zaids, 'Amrs, or Bakrs, as much as he himself, were part of a single existential continuum, the same Essence. The image of the poet Muḥammad Taqī Mīr (1722–1810) comes unbidden to the mind: a man terribly aloof from, indeed even scornful of the milling crowd of humanity in his personal life, but every bit of him existentially committed to its condition in his art.

A few of 'Askarī's essays and a short story are sampled in the two sections devoted to introducing his work in this issue of the *AUS*. The story, "Ḥarāmjādī" (The Bitch), is admittedly his major fictional piece in a body of work that extends, at most, to a dozen short stories. Not only was it the author's favorite, it was also well regarded by most Urdu critics. Reading it today, sixty-four years after its writing, when Urdu fiction has moved away from both the unabashed and unrelenting Socialist realism of the Progressives (the Taraqqīpasands) and the lumbering pedanticism of the Aesthetes (the Jamālparasts), as well as their cloying romanticism, the story may appear to be a bit bland in its theme. It was not, though, in the context of its day. But even then, just as now, it remains a significant experiment in the form, and 'Askarī himself has said as much in his epilogue to the collection *Jazīrē*.

I'm grateful to Shamsu'r-Raḥmān Fārūqī for his generous help in identifying some Western names and certain obscure text fragments, and to Mehr Afshan Farooqi and Baran Rehman for translating what they could in the time available to them. But I do hope that this is just the beginning and that future issues of the *AUS* will have occasion to present more of 'Askarī's work.

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It will be readily noticed and might even appear puzzling that whereas 'Askarī is mainly concerned with Urdu and Islamic culture in "Adab Mēṅ

Ṣifāt kā Isteʿmāl"[1] ("The Use of Adjectives in Literature"), he nonetheless talks about the East, which extends beyond Urdu and Islamic culture, as a unity of thought, experience, and worldview, indeed as, in some sense, sharing an identical metaphysics. Not that there is anything inherently wrong in such a conflation, but one wonders about the basis of this assumption and the ease with which it is made. In casual conversations with some Pakistani intellectuals, I have often, even as recently as 2001, found them criticizing ʿAskarī for what they felt was his unwarranted inclusion of just about every religion and culture east of the Suez in what is essentially and narrowly an Islamic worldview. As I read this essay, I too wondered about the factual basis for this inclusion.

I do not know whether ʿAskarī had or had not studied anything of non-Urdu-and-Persian literatures, religions and cultures of the East when he said, "and in regard to Eastern literature, my familiarity doesn't go beyond Urdu and Persian literature." Is this the proverbial *kasr-e nafsī* (humility) of a South Asian Muslim gentleman, or indeed a statement of fact? But ʿAskarī also asserts confidently in the sentence that follows, "However, you may, if you wish, replace a statement of Ibn-e ʿArabī that I cite with a statement of Shankaracharya," and earlier, "These beliefs were present in all the major civilizations of the East.…" It's not very likely that if ʿAskarī were actually unfamiliar with a subject he would make assertions about it with such confidence and such an air of finality. I'm rather inclined to think that the apparent contradiction in the two statements is merely rhetorical, a manifestation of an arched style of writing with which any reader of ʿAskarī is only too familiar. In this style "ignorance" is often "feigned," but with the knowledge that it will not be taken for fact. Internal evidence does not support the view that ʿAskarī knew as little about Eastern religious, cultural and literary traditions as he claims. On the contrary, his knowledge about these was considerable. He refers to them with the casual ease of one knowledgeable person, if not exactly an insider, talking to another knowledgeable person, his pronouncements to the contrary notwithstanding. He may not have known the Eastern traditions in their minutiae, nonetheless his unusually keen and astute mind, with its enviable powers of analysis and synthesis, could certainly make generally correct assessments about their character from the "little" that he did know. There is more than a whiff of *apnā'iyat*, of felt kinship, of shared destiny, in the way he talks about, for example, Hindu meta-

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[1]In his collection of essays *Vaqt kī Rāgnī* (Lahore: Qausain, 1979), 21–42.

physics. Moreover, reference to Eastern cultures and religions is not exclusive to the present article; they are, in fact, discussed consistently in several essays in the *Vaqt kī Rāgnī*.

The extent of the affinity found between Taṣavvuf and Vedanta and Buddhist metaphysics became apparent to me much later than when I first read 'Askarī's essay some years ago. It happened when I read Toshihiko Izutsu's little book *Creation and the Timeless Order of Things: Essays in Islamic Mystical Philosophy* and his much earlier and more extensive work on *Sufism and Taoism*. A few examples may serve to place 'Askarī's thoughts in an appropriate context.

Talking about *Tauḥīd* (Unity/Oneness), the mainstay of Islam, whether from the perspective of doctrine and belief or Taṣavvuf, 'Askarī injects most unobtrusively a fairly innocuous comment, "there cannot be two views about Oneness," implying that, whether Muslim or Hindu, ultimately the concept of "Oneness" can, of necessity, mean only one thing. If one perceives it differently as a Hindu and a Muslim, one does so phenomenally, as a result of one's respective historical conditioning, one's locus in empirical time. This is not, however, "Oneness *qua* Oneness." In its essence Oneness is neither Hindu nor Muslim, indeed it ceases to be "Oneness" as soon as any kind of determination (in the present case, plurality) is predicated on it. Hence, one cannot postulate two "Onenesses," one for Muslims, the other for Hindus.

Here is a revealing passage from Izutsu, worth quoting in full:

> The [Taṣavvuf] conception of the *tajallī* is structurally identical with the Vedantic conception of *adhyāsa* or "superimposition," according to which the originally undivided unity of pure *nirguna Brahman*, the absolutely unconditioned Absolute, appears divided because of the different "names and forms" (*nāma-rūpa*) that are imposed upon the Absolute by "ignorance" (*avidyā*). It is remarkable, from the viewpoint of comparison between Islamic philosophy and Vedanta, that *avidyā* which, subjectively, is the human "ignorance" of the true reality of things, is, objectively, exactly the same thing as *māyā* which is the self-conditioning power inherent in Brahman itself. The "names and forms" that are said to be superimposed upon the Absolute by *avidyā* would correspond to the Islamic concept of "quiddities" (*māhiyāt*, sg. *māhīyah*) which are nothing other than the externalized forms of the Divine "names and attributes" (*asmā' wa-sifāt*). And the Vedantic *māyā* as the self-determining power of the Absolute would find its exact Islamic counterpart in the concept of the Divine "existential mercy" (*rahmah wujūdīyah*).

(28)

In discussing the two aspects of the Absolute, namely, the *bāṯin* or interior and *ẓāhir* or exterior (which may also be described as, respectively, the *positive* and *negative*), Izutsu says:

> This basic distinction between the positive and negative aspects in the metaphysical constitution of the Absolute is common to all the major Oriental philosophies other than Islamic. In Vedanta, for instance, we have the celebrated thesis of *dvi-rūpa Brahma* "two-fold Brahman," that is, the distinction between the *nirguna Brahman* and *saguna Brahman*, i.e. the absolutely attributeless Brahman and the self-same Brahman adorned with all kinds of attributes. In Buddhism we have the distinction between "Suchness as absolute Nothingness" and "Suchness as non-Nothingness." Taoists distinguish between Non-Being and Being. Confucianists distinguish between *wu chi* (the Ultimateless) and *t'ai chi* (the Supreme Ultimate).

(86)

In Chapter 3 of *Creation*, entitled "An Analysis of Wahdat al-Wujūd: Toward a Metaphilosophy of Oriental Philosophies," Izutsu, in fact, makes a strong case for the feasibility of the Islamic metaphysical concept of *Vaḥdat al-Vujūd* as a framework for analyzing and clarifying most of the historical forms of Oriental thought. "I am interested in this particular aspect of this particular problem," he writes,

> out of all the interesting problems offered by the history of Iranian Islam, not necessarily because of my own personal philosophical attitude, but rather, and primarily, because of my conviction that the concept of *wahdat al-wujūd* is something which, if structurally analyzed and elaborated in a proper way, will provide a theoretical framework in terms of which we shall be able to clarify one of the most fundamental modes of thinking which characterize Oriental philosophy in general—not only Islamic philosophy, but most of the major forms of Oriental thought so that we might make a positive contribution from the standpoint of the philosophical minds of the East towards the much desired development of a new world philosophy based on the spiritual and intellectual heritages of East and West.

(66–8)

Similarity (correspondence) also exists between Islamic views and Vedanta philosophy (as represented by Shankara) regarding the problem of the reality and unreality of the phenomenal world (10), between the illusory nature of multiplicity, which is devoid of any metaphysical or ontological value (24), between the Absolute-in-its-Absoluteness of Taṣavvuf and the *parabrahman* (Supreme Brahman) of Vedanta (34), the *wu chi* (the Ultimateless) of neo-Confucianism (34), and so on.

It is not intended here to produce a comprehensive inventory of such correspondences and affinities between Taṣavvuf and Vedanta philosophy, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, etc., although one can get a fair idea of them even by a casual glance at Izutsu's delightful book, whose main purpose is not a study of such correspondences, which he only mentions in passing, but rather a delineation of the drift and course of Taṣavvuf thought in Islam, especially as it unfolded in the philosophy of *Vaḥdat al-Vujūd* ([Transcendent] Unity of Being).

My own purpose in this rather long excursus has been to demonstrate that a few stray references to such resonances found in 'Askarī hardly tell the whole story of his encounter and consequent engagement with the intellectual heritage of the East, his deep and long reflection about aspects of this heritage, and the edge of authenticity and the rare economy of expression that such reflection and internalization gave him. His writing style—so refreshingly unlike scholarly presentations in the environment of Western academies—steers clear of documentation-done-to-death, even for the tallest of the claims he makes, with a disdain truly worthy of a classical Muslim writer (a trait also in evidence in the early writings of Urdu's most erudite and astute living critic Shamsu'r-Raḥmān Fārūqī). 'Askarī, rightly or wrongly, expected his reader to bring to his essays an equal amount of familiarity with major texts and ideas that he had himself acquired by poring over them with the complete absorption of a lover or, if you will, the obsession and delight of one gripped with a mania (I hope I do him no injustice). So, however light and casual his style might appear to be, it can scarcely be denied that underneath it lies a much deeper concern, a careful and long-and-hard thinking through of ideas and assumptions.

3

The central thesis of 'Askarī's essay is that the division of a "word" into three categories of "noun," "verb," and "particle," and the treatment of

"adjective" merely as an offshoot of "noun" was necessarily determined for the grammarians of classical Arabic by a view of Reality which was developed within the Taṣavvuf-oriented metaphysics of Islamic culture. In that environment, ontologically speaking, only NOUN or NAME—itself an articulation of the Absolute through self-disclosure (*tajallī*)—was truly real, the verb and adjective being no more than mere by-products of, but nonetheless ontologically contained within, the NOUN. So primacy has to be awarded to the NOUN from the perspective of value, which itself is defined by its position in the ontological spectrum of Reality.

From grammar to metaphysics is indeed a big leap. 'Askarī's whole point is that the sense of leap felt by contemporary Muslim societies is the product of those societies' estrangement from their cultural roots. But that aside, his argument will remain unintelligible for readers unfamiliar with the metaphysical assumptions that lie at its foundation. It will not be out of place here to describe them briefly. In what follows, my debt to Izutsu is evident. Much of what I say belongs to him, and whatever mis-apprehensions may have crept into my reading of his works are my own responsibility.

Muslim philosophers had realized quite early on that the Islamic no-tion of *Tauḥīd* (Divine Unity/Oneness), if taken to its logical conclusion, could only mean the unity of Being/Existence or, in the Qur'ānic usage, "al-Ḥaqq" (the Reality), otherwise duality would unavoidably result. How does one go from that "Oneness" to the multiplicity of those objects in the empirical world and what must be the precise modality of the rela-tionship of "objects/Creation" to the Reality?[2] (It should be immediately apparent that Muslim metaphysicians didn't call the Reality by its relig-ious name Allāh (God)—which is a theological concept and theology it-self occupies a much later but nonetheless crucial stage in the descent of the Absolute along the ontological strata—for Being/Reality is, in itself, unknowable and ineffable. On the other hand, "God" is a determination and a delimitation which cannot be predicated upon the Absolute in its Absoluteness where it is not just beyond any condition but also beyond the condition of unconditionality. It is, at best, a theological concept.)

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[2]One can readily see that disagreement, and sometimes its destructive con-sequences, simply evaporates the second the main force in the universe is identi-fied as Being, Existence, or Reality, and how, conversely, much trouble for mankind results when this force is given such names as "Allāh," "Jesus Christ," "Bhagwan," "Yahweh," etc.

These questions and their related issues were addressed in the philosophy of *Vaḥdat al-Vujūd* (Unity of Existence), especially by its principal propounder the Andalusian theosophist Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī (1165–1240) and later by a host of other thinkers among his followers, mostly in Iran.

According to Ibn-e ʿArabī, the structure of Reality is something like this: the Reality, which has two aspects (*bāṭin*/interior; *ẓāhir*/exterior), is beyond the reach of human cognition in its interiority. It is, in other words, the "self-concealing" aspect of Reality. At this stage Reality is described as "*ẕāt al-vujūd*" (Absolute Existence), or "*ghayb al-ghuyūb*" (Mystery of Mysteries). But this is its "positive" aspect in that Reality is so indeterminate that even the condition of "unconditionality" cannot be applied to it. When "unconditionality" is applied, this stage is technically called "*aḥadīya*."[3] In its other "self-revealing" aspect, however, Reality becomes the metaphysical source of the phenomenal world. From this aspect, in other words, arises the "self-manifesting act of pure existence" through what is technically described as the "most sacred emanation," which then places the Reality in the stage of "*vāhidīya*," or "Unity."

At the stage of *vāhidīya*, Unity of Existence begins to acquire inner articulations. These articulations are called Divine Names and Attributes (*asmā va ṣifāt*). This is also the stage of Eternal Archetypes[4] (*al-aʿyān aṣ-ṣābita*). The phenomenal world with its multiplicity of objects is still a stage away. It is the Divine Names and Attributes or these Eternal Archetypes that will actualize in concrete forms the objects of the material world.

Two further points may be made here: Although the Qurʾān lists only ninety-nine names of God, they are, of necessity, infinite in number. This is so because Divine Names and Attributes are simply articulations of Divine Self-Knowledge, and a terminal number cannot be postulated of the ways and forms and relations of Divine Self-Knowledge. Secondly, the

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[3]This and "*vāhidīya*" in the following paragraph would both seem to mean the same thing (unity). But Ibn-e ʿArabī differentiates between the two. "The basic difference he seems to see is that *aḥad* designates God's unity in respect of *tanzīh*, while *wāḥid* designates it in terms of *tashbīh*."—William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-ʿArabī's Cosmology* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), 167–8.

[4]Also translated as "Immutable Essences" and, more recently by Chittick, as "Fixed Entities."

differentiated and concrete objects of the phenomenal world are to Ibn-e 'Arabī, just as to most of the followers of *Vaḥdat al-Vujūd*, merely shadows —both real and unreal at the same time. They are real because they are, after all, part of the Essence, and unreal because their phenomenal existence, although it appears concrete, is not, ontologically, of self-subsistent existents. There just aren't any such existents.

'Askarī has tried to establish the primacy of "noun." Eventually all judgments about the status or rank of a thing depend, of necessity, on some kind of touchstone by which value is assigned to an object's individual worth. It would appear that 'Askarī finds this touchstone to be the metaphysical concept of the Unity of Existence in Islamic culture.

A question that I wish 'Askarī had raised and, ideally, answered in order to provide greater grist for his argument is this: If Taṣavvuf has assumed a paradigmatic role in shaping the morphological and syntactical structure of—in the present case—Urdu, is this also true of other major languages within Islamic culture (Arabic, Persian, Turkish, etc.)? Countries where these languages are dominant have also experienced the impact of Western literary forms and sensibilities in the modern period. What are the ways in which these countries have tried to negotiate this impact and make it workable within their own linguistic and cultural environments? Urdu comes nowhere near the number of translations from European languages into, say, Arabic or Persian. How have contemporary translations of Western authors faired in Arabic and Persian? Although 'Askarī was studying Arabic before he died, he probably didn't know it well enough to address this question at the time he wrote this piece in 1960. However, he knew Persian quite well. At least some examples from modern Persian poetry and prose would have been helpful in delineating the nature of his argument more fully.

4

A few words about my translation. The word "Taṣavvuf," which lies in the *suvaidā'-e qalb*, the very core of the heart of this essay, and is its foundational principle, is generally translated as "Sufism." The error of using "mysticism," "esotericism," or "spirituality" for "Taṣavvuf" has been variously pointed out by many contemporary scholars, most eloquently by

William C. Chittick,[5] and the inherent inadequacy of the term "Sufism," to say nothing of its employment by Western powers for the extension of their colonial domination of Muslim countries,[6] also makes one hesitate to use it. Nonetheless, it is now the standard term for "Taṣavvuf" in English. I could have used it myself but have not, and I have used "Sufi" only twice as an "adjective." Every time I instinctively used "Sufism," I could feel 'Askarī's spirit breathing down my neck. I knew him personally, and I knew it would pain him immeasurably to see "Taṣavvuf" being described (though he would have used "transmogrified") as "Sufism." Few Urdu writers are as careful with words as he was. There is scarcely a sentence in his fairly extensive oeuvre where one can observe looseness, carelessness of usage, or randomness. Then again, the very tone and ambience of the present essay is so grave and measured that it demands absolute respect for its author's terminological choices.

'Askarī uses the Arabic words "*ism*" "*ṣifat*," and "*fiʿl*" consistently throughout his essay. Each of these words is both a grammatical term and a common word, and a native reader knows contextually which of the two is meant. For instance, "*ism*" in its common sense means a "*name*" (his name, God's name, the name of a tree, etc.), but grammatically it is a *noun.* This consistency and uniformity of usage is difficult to maintain in English, where, depending on the context, it has to be rendered either as "name" or as "noun." Whereas it is all right to say "Raḥmān is a name of God," it is not all right to say "Raḥmān is a noun of God." There is, however, no such problem when "*ism*" is used in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and perhaps a number of other languages, where it can mean either. The shifting vocabulary does violate the consistency and cohesiveness of the original, but these are the standard, even expected, hazards of any translation activity.

The same uniformity and concision is observed in the use of the word "*ṣifat*." Grammatically it means an "adjective." Beyond that it can have a host of closely related meanings: "quality," "property," "attribute," "characteristic," "distinguishing mark," "peculiarity," etc. While it works smoothly in Urdu for all situations in the article, in English a distinction should be maintained between its use as a grammatical term and simply

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[5] *Sufism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 1; see also Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), 7.

[6] Cf. Ernst, 1–ff.

as a common word, depending, again, on the context. So while "*blue* is an *adjective*," "*mercy* is an *attribute* of God."

Derived from the Arabic triliteral root "*f-ʿ-l*," "*fiʿl*" simply means an "action" (activity, doing, work, performance, and function being some of its other related meanings), but as a technical term in Arabic grammar, it means a "verb." Likewise, "*fāʿil*," from the same root, is "a producer of action or effect," and "*fāʿilīyat*" means "activity/effectiveness."

My two main problems had less to do with translation than with ʿAskarī's predilection for approximately transliterating European personal names or giving only the last name, and for producing in Urdu translation partial quotes from Western poetry. In the former case, it has not been possible to positively identify such names so their English spellings are, at best, conjectural. In the latter case, I first translated, for instance, "*čʰōṭī čʰōṭī čiṛyāṅ*" and "*narm-o-nāzuk paudē*" (from Chaucer) as "small birds" and "delicate plants," until I was helped immensely from a not-so-*ghaibī* source—S. R. Fārūqī.

<div align="center">5</div>

Since the core of this essay has much to do with Taṣavvuf and its metaphysics, especially as expounded by Ibn-e ʿArabī, I list here (excepting works already cited in footnotes) a few books which readers who want to pursue these subjects in greater depth will find useful:

On Sufism: Titus Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine* (Lahore: Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1959); Toshihiko Izutsu, *Creation and the Timeless Order of Things: Essays in Islamic Mystical Philosophy* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1994); and Sachiko Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light: Wang Tai-yü's "Great Learning of the Pure and Real" and Liu Chih's "Displaying the Concealment of the Real Realm"* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000).

On Ibn ʿArabi (Life and Thought): Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn ʿArabī*, translated by Peter Kingsley (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993); William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994) and *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989); M. Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn ʿArabī, the Book and the Law*, translated by David Streight (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993) and *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ʿArabī*, translated by Li-

adain Sherrard (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993); Peter Coates, *Ibn 'Arabi and Modern Thought: The History of Taking Metaphysics Seriously* (Oxford: Anqa Publishing 2002); Stephen Hirtenstein, *The Unlimited Mercifier: The Spiritual Life and Thought of Ibn 'Arabī* (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 1999; Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1999); and Toshihiko Izutsu, *Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

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'Askarī's "flirtation" with Taṣavvuf (at least this is how Pakistani intellectuals see his engagement) was not viewed charitably by a goodly section of Urdu literati, who felt that this blending of "spirituality" and "literature" was not only unwarranted but also went against the grain of Urdu literature, much of which was purely liberal in spirit. A few novels of Nažīr Aḥmad and a few other stray writings aside, Urdu literature had jealously guarded its autonomy and resisted any encroachment of its liberal values. Whether such fears were justified or whether it was even proper to form such fears from a literary point of view is not the question here. The fact remains that the contemporary image of Taṣavvuf may have contributed in part to generating those fears. It is no surprise that many Muslims throughout the world today look upon Taṣavvuf with disfavor, or at least with a degree of ambivalence.[7] It was not entirely the colonial fault that Taṣavvuf received a largely uncomplimentary image, though colonial methods may have exaggerated certain preexisting tendencies in Taṣavvuf, such as thaumaturgy and the superstitious practices which go at least as far back as the establishment of the first "*ṭarīqas*" ("brotherhoods"). This was the result of an elaborate organizational project seeking to swell the ranks of membership as well as of parasitic satellite cultures that inevitably form around any potentially lucrative opportunity. And even though, since the 1800s, and certainly since the appearance of the Progressives in the 1930s, Urdu intellectuals have seen nothing but their defeat and degradation in the smallest manifestation of Islamic culture, they were patently in error to conflate 'Askarī's Taṣavvuf with the sordid manifestations

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[7]For a better understanding of the chemistry of this phenomenon and for the historical reasons leading to its appearance, see Ernst, *Shambhala Guide*, preface and chapter one.

of workaday, penny-a-miracle pirs in the contemporary landscape of South Asia. 'Askarī was, if anything, an intellectual *par excellence.* His admiration, indeed at times awed reverence of Taṣavvuf had little to do with the credulous and gullible crowds that might throng around the tombs of Dātā Ganj-Bakhsh in Lahore or Khvāja Muʿīnuʾd-Dīn Čishtī at Ajmer, and everything to do with the possibilities the metaphysics of Taṣavvuf, especially in its highly imaginative concept of *Vaḥdat al-Vujūd,* offered to his forever inquisitive intellect.

This is also as good a place as any to dispel the fallacy of another common assumption about 'Askarī, that he had turned religious. There is, of course, nothing wrong in being religious, he had every right to do so. But this term is too often invoked derisively to characterize someone as a "fundamentalist." The entire weight of 'Askarī's essays up to the 1960s argues forcefully against it. "Allāh" is not an affliction to begin with; however, "God" for 'Askarī is merely a theological entity. Metaphysically speaking, or speaking in the language of *Vaḥdat al-Vujūd,* theology ultimately has to do with the "sensible" world, the terminal point beyond which the emanation of the Absolute can go no further. So, for him, just as for Ibn-e 'Arabī, the key word is rather the "Absolute" (or "One" or "Being"). ❏