The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Illuminationism

Medieval Islamic Civilization, An Encyclopaedia

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Derived from "illumination," a conventional translation of the Arabic term *ishraq* (lit. radiance, shining of the rising sun), "illuminationism" refers to the doctrine of the *Ishraqiyyun,* a school of philosophical and mystical thought of various Graeco-Oriental roots whose principles were propounded as an ancient "science of lights" (*'ilm al-anwar*) by Shihab al-Din Yahya al-Suhrawardi in his *Kitab hikmat al-ishraq,* a fundamental work completed in 582AH/1186 CE. The author – not to be confused with the well-known Sufi Shaykh Shihab al-Din 'Umar al-Suhrawardi (d. 632 AH/1234 CE) – was an original thinker in the tradition of Avicenna and, like the latter, a prolific writer of Arabic and Persian philosophical treatises, as well as a number of tales of a more mystical and allusive nature. Born probably around 550 AH/1155 CE in Suhraward, a village near Zanjan (Iranian Azerbayjan), he is said to have studied philosophy and Shafi'i law in Maragha, according to some accounts also in Isfahan. Some time later, he must have moved for an extended period within the upper Mesopotamian region of Mardin, Diyarbakir, and Kharput, where the Artuqid prince 'Imad al-Din Abu Bakr b. Qara Arslan (581-600 AH/1185-1204 CE) became his patron. It was to this 'Imad al-Din that he dedicated one of his characteristic writings, *Al-Alwah al-'Imadiyya,* a work of mixed philosophical and Sufi content ending up with a fervent glorification of the mythical Iranian kings, Faridun and Kay Khusraw. He finally settled in Aleppo, where his ideas evidently met with the displeasure of the established religious authorities. He was executed on charges of heresy in 587 AH/1191 CE or thereabouts by order of the famous sultan Saladin (hence his byname *al-maqtul*, "the executed one").

Sceptical of the formalised structures of Avicennian metaphysics and epistemology in which he himself had been raised, Suhrawardi made an attempt to work out an alternative approach to reality. Based on visionary experience and the recognition of a separate world of images, he envisioned a dynamic world of multiple irradiations originating with the distant "light of lights" (*nur al-anwar*, the *ishraqi* equivalent of the Avicennian "necessary of existence," that is, God) and falling in various ways and degrees of intensity on obscure matter. In technical language, his approach came to be known later as the doctrine of the primary reality of quiddities (*asala al-mahiyya*), as opposed to the primary reality of existence (*asalat al-wujud*). According to Suhrawardi, the human soul is a luminous substance, namely, the "regent light" (*al-nur al-mudabbir* or *al-nur al-isfahbud* in *ishraqi* terminology-perhaps a reminiscence of the Stoic *hegemonikon*), knows whatever it does really know through a direct encounter with the illumined object (*muqabalat al-mustanir*) rather than by way of abstraction in terms of Aristotelian species and genera. The discovery of this type of knowledge, called presential knowledge (*al-'ilm al-*

huduri), is regarded as one of Suhrawardi's lasting contributions in the history of Islamic thought.

There can be no doubt that Suhrawardi was intimately familiar with Sufi traditions and spiritual practices such as *dhikr* (remembrance of God) and *sama'* (listening to music), but he does not seem to have been part of the established Sufi organisations of his time, which generally rather enjoyed the favours of Saladin. In his "tales of initiation," the luminous guiding principle is frequently encountered as a Cosmic Intellect, a figure of angelic or otherwise mythical qualities (such as the bird, Simurgh), sometimes with the attributes of a Sufi Shaykh, or simply as the "Teacher". Suhrawardi makes it clear that he considered classical Sufi saints rather than the *falasifa* as the true philosophers of the then present (Islamic) era, and also hints that the ancient wisdom had reached him through mysterious Sufi channels, but he associates his science of lights principally with the names of Plato, Hermes, Empedokles, Pythagoras, and the "Oriental principle (*qa'idat al-sharq*) concerning light and darkness" of the Sages of ancient Iran. In effect, he created a new school of Neoplatonic thought of a distinctly Iranian flavour, which to some extent paralleled earlier developments in Fatimid Ismaili thought. This, together with his ambiguous allusions to the "time deprived of divine administration," when the "powers of darkness take over" and the rightful "representative of God" (*khalifat Allah*) or "divinely inspired leader" (*al-imam al-muta'allih*) is hidden, may well have been enough to provoke his enemies among the '*ulama'* and to eventually lead to his execution.

His ideas were nevertheless taken up and elaborated one or two generations later by philosophers such as Ibn Kammuna (d. 683 AH/1284 CE), Shams al-Din Muhammad al-Shahrazuri (d. after 687 AH/1288 CE), and Qutb al-Din al-Shirazi (d. 710 AH/1311 CE or 716 AH/1316 CE), and were at that time well-known among philosophical Sufis (such as 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Qashani, d. 736 AH/ 1335 CE) as a distinct *ishraqi* tradition. They continued to exercise considerable influence on later intellectual developments in Persia, especially in the philosophical schools of Shiraz (fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) and Isfahan (seventeenth century) with Mir Damad and Mulla Sadra. They were also influential in Moghul India (notably in mixed Sufi and Zoroastrian milieux at the court of the emperor Akbar) and in Ottoman Turkey, where they appear to have found their way into more orthodox Sufi circles (for example, Ismail Ankaravi, d. 1041 AH/1631 CE). However, it should be noted that the occurrence of the term *ishraq* in Sufi texts does not necessarily indicate an influence of illuminationism as understood by Suhrawardi. The North African Sufi treatise titled *Qawanin hikam al-ishraq* by Abul-Mawahib al-Tunisi al-Shadhili (d. 882 AH/1477 CE) and published in English as *Illumination in Islamic Mysticism* (translated by E.J. Jurji, Princeton, 1938) has little more in common with Suhrawardi's principal work than a similar title.

On the other hand, Suhrawardi's *Ishraqiyyun* were by no means unknown in fourteenth-century Muslim Spain, as is evident from the excellent summary of "the views of the followers of [the doctrine of] the lights among the Ancients" given by Lisan al-Din Ibn al-Khatib al-Gharnati (d. 776 AH/1374 CE) in his *Rawdat al-ta'rjf bil-hubb al-sharif* (edited by M. al-Kattani, Beirut, 1970, II, 564-574); and it is worth noting that this author clearly distinguishes them from "the views of the philosophers naturalised among the Muslims" on one hand, that is, the Aristotelian tradition ending up with Averroes, and from Sufism on the other.

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