

Antiquity Comes Full Circle – Part IV



Sufism – The Promise of Peace

At the end of the first century of Islam, the Islamic world was beginning one of the most explosive moments in human intellectual history. While theologians and philosophers were busy applying rationalist perspectives to the central issues of human existence and were busy interpreting the Koran, groups of ascetics began to appear, challenging the emergent Imperial culture. They brought a message of integration and peace. They were the Sufis. The key figure credited with the emergence of this beautiful synthesis is Rabi'a al-Adawiyya. Rabi'a was a woman, which makes her contribution all the more incredible in an era of male domination. She was born to a poor family in Basra (Iraq) in 717 AD and was sold into slavery as a girl. As the story goes, she was eventually released by her owner when he saw her continuously performing all night vigils after a full day's work.

She led a life of intense religious activity and intellectual conversation. Her role in the development of Sufi thought is illustrated in numerous anecdotes concerning her relationship with Hasan of Basra (who many would say is the founder of Sufism). Hasan was the most famous religious authority of his time, an expert on hadith (traditions of the prophet). He was also acquainted with many of the prophet's companions. He was one of the first advocates of ascetic piety (abstaining from worldly pleasures and steeping oneself in true devotion to God) in Islam and at the same time he was one of the first critical investigators into the issue of divine pre-determination and human free will. So, for many not only is he the founder of Sufism but also of Islamic scholastic theology (Kalam).

If, as the anecdotes suggest, Rabi'a knew Hasan, he must have been very old at the time and she very young. What makes Rabi'a quite unique is she is alleged to have competed verbally

with Hasan in the tradition of 'spiritual jousting' which was a feature of Sufism. She is said to have demonstrated in these interactions that she was the wiser of the two. Later she went on to synthesise ascetic piety with theological concerns (something the great Hasan never did as he saw them as separate and distinct subjects) which created a new way of thinking and became the very foundation of Sufism. This synthesis combined the Qur'anic doctrine of the unity of God (tawhid) with ascetic impulses and a continuing investigation of the issue of human free will and divine predetermination.

For her, divine unity could only be achieved by turning one's entire life and consciousness towards God, to consider anything else was a form of idolatry. She went on to constantly criticise Hasan and other spiritual leaders for becoming attached to their ascetic piety and treating it as an end in itself. She felt that those who claimed to despise the world for the sake of God were not paying enough attention to the affirmation of God, because if they were, they'd have no time to despise the world. It is this infatuation with the divine (God), a spiritual absorption, that led to her celebrated notion of sincerity (Sidq), or sincere love.

For Rabi'a, sincerity was not compatible with acting out of hope for reward or fear of punishment. Here we see another significant point of difference with Hasan of Basra. He was famous for his intensification of the fear of hell in meditation as a way of monitoring and overcoming one's appetite for the carnal self and materialism. Rabi'a rejected the entire notion of reward and punishment and in numerous prayers she is quoted as asking the Deity to deny her paradise if she worshipped out of hope for that, and to condemn her to hell if she only worshipped out of fear. For her, only pure love for God was an antidote to our ills: a principle you may remember, earlier in this series, described as Bhakti (love and devotion) in Hinduism as one of the three ways to sit in God's heart. Rabi'a's notion of pure love was welded to complete faith. For her, not to completely trust in God (tawakkul) was a contradiction of the highest order for one who was lost in God's love.

She refused to ask for anything of the Supreme Deity as He already knew her condition and needs and would therefore respond accordingly. Such requests would violate both faith and acceptance. She believed this was how one could shed the 'skin of the ego' (which is a central principle of Sufi thought: mystical union). This was not a fatalistic way of living or a passive existence, on the contrary, this absolute acceptance was described by Rabi'a as the key to 'authentic action'.

Rabi'a's contribution cannot be overstated. This self-educated, former slave girl of Basra went on to lay a beautiful foundation that would shape Sufism right up to the present time, as she and other Sufi Saints helped in the uneasy marriage between India and Islam (Hindus and Muslims). Some of the other Sufi Saints that built Sufism into a gentle and beautiful chorus of peace include: Junayd (910 AD), Bistomi (875AD), Tustari (896AD), Hallaj (922AD) and Quashayri (986-1074AD). To them, much is owed. Unfortunately, as wonderful as the Sufi contribution was, it remained insufficient to address all the differences between Islam and the natives of India who felt stripped of their riches, ideology, and culture.

Eastern Evolution or Further Demise?

To the European, Asia was fabulously wealthy, a mysterious amalgam of culture, philosophy, and splendour but infinitely dangerous. It was a place where the Saracens (heathens) had deprived Christendom of its rightful centre in Jerusalem. There was at this time (the Middle Ages and Renaissance period) the rise of the destructive and devilishly cruel Mongols who would go on to establish the largest land empire ever, and dramatically change the history of the Asian continent. Occasional travellers to the East, men such as Marco Polo (date of birth and death 1254-1324), brought back accounts of what they found there. Sadly, the small amounts of factual knowledge were embellished with innuendo and imagination, leaving the average educated European totally ignorant of the real condition of the East. With European expansion and subsequent invasions this would eventually change.

In the same way, the East showed very little interest in the West. It was totally absorbed with the spread and intermingling of its own cultures. Islam, and before that Buddhism, were spreading their influence well outside of the incubators in which they'd been conceived. Unlike medieval Christianity, these religions were largely assimilated into their new cultural homes, with benefit to both the religion and the culture to which it had now become attached.

We've not, apart from in our introduction, made any significant references to southeast Asia but it's important to say that Japan and Korea eventually found their place as centres of cultural influence alongside their older siblings: China and India. We will touch on this later. South and East Asia's evolution reflects much of what has been written but to address it more fully is too great an undertaking for this piece of work. Suffice it to say that both cultures (Korea having formerly been under Japanese rule) are built largely on Buddhist principles, and so morality and ethics were and remain pivotal to how these cultures have unfolded.

There are of course differences in ideology and religious practices, but the principles of meditation, karma, rebirth, heaven, The Way (Dao), various Confucian ideals and concepts such as destiny versus free will, and society versus individual, ran in an unbroken way through the generations, shaping the psyche of that part of Asia. For those seeking a deeper understanding of this aspect of history much is written. Our focus for the moment is to return to the Indo-Chinese evolution... or is it demise?

We've partly told the story of the Muslim conquest of India by Turks, which began in the twelfth century and continued for a further 300 years in the north of India. This expansion had absorbed Iran along the way and also had defeated the Byzantine Emperor Romanus in 1071. In 1076 Jerusalem was captured, increasing the Turkish pressure on India. By the thirteenth century, successive rulers pushed, by stages southwest to Gujarat and east to Bihar and Bengal from Delhi. Then in the fourteenth century, they moved across the challenging Vindhya mountains into southern India. By 1327 the conquest of the Delhi Sultanate was so advanced that Sultan Muhammad bin Tughluq founded a second capital in the Deccan.

The new capital in Deccan was called Tughluqabad. This was a majestic city announcing the 'foreign-ness' of the new dynasty's great power and opulence. The city contained a great palace, a massive citadel, battlements encased in the surrounding walls. There were also

pointed arches, domes and minarets of mosques, colleges, even royal tombs. All these features had travelled from western Asia. This was all alien to India. So was the mixture of Turkish and Persian blood and the language which defined this new ruling class. The Sultan was legitimised by the Caliph, the religious head of the Muslims, with a traditional robe of honour, underlining acceptance of his dominion. This foreign domination echoed across all of North India and the Sultan's influence went on to permeate all aspects of culture, such as lexicography (vocabulary) and language in all its forms, poetry and history to name a few.

Hinduism's on-going battle with Islam continued during this period as new mosques were built and the Ulema (leaders in communal prayer, expounders of the holy Koran and the sayings of the Prophet) set their new orthodoxy against the old orthodoxy of Hinduism. The Sufi order of Muslim mystics were busy preaching personal devotion rather than formal ritual as being the best approach to a relationship with God. As a result of their message, a process of mass conversion to Islam took place in the areas now known as Pakistan and Bangladesh. Another of the many interesting contradictions worth noting is that in the first century of Turkish rule in India all the rulers were either slaves or descendants of slaves. The use of slaves in high position since the early Turkish dynasties was commonplace. Many of these slaves were educated sons of captured chiefs and had achieved distinction through their ability and loyal service. The irony here is that these former slaves then helped maintain the Muslim minority in power, leaving many Hindus feeling like (and in some case treated like) slaves in their own country!

So, Hindi (India's primary language) was tolerated but Sanskrit was preferred and used more readily in administration and official circles. Alongside it a new language developed, which reflected the cross-fertilisation of culture, beliefs, and ideas. That language was Urdu. Urdu was a mixture of Sanskrit, Arabic and Turkish. It was used only by common people at first, but by the seventeenth century it was accepted as a medium of literary expression. By way of comparison, let us look at what was happening in China around the same period to see if the East was indeed evolving or in fact contributing to its own demise...

The Chinese Experience

The period of political disunity that emerged after the fall of the T'ang dynasty was brought to an end in 960 by the Sung emperors, who ruled from 960 to 1297. They established the third great Chinese dynasty. Their 300-year reign was not as confident, expansionist and aggressive as that of the Han and T'ang dynasties and as a result of some unwise alliances and various conflicts their rule was arguably not as potent and grand. However, the Sung periods saw significant advances in the fields of medicine, biology, and mathematics, as well as military techniques. The growing technical knowledge of this era helped with water irrigation and conservancy measures, which improved the food supply for the growing population. Maritime commerce also began to flourish as new trade routes across the seas began to emerge as an alternative to land routes and whole new areas of trade were also being exploited. Improved navigation methods and the construction of larger more seaworthy ships aided this development. Initially a lot of this trade was under Arab and Persian control as there were sizeable foreign communities to be found at various posts along the China coast.

However, under the Sung dynasty that began to change, and the influence and power passed to Chinese merchants who rapidly came to dominate the trade in precious silks, porcelains, and fine Chinese handicrafts, which were in demand especially in south-east Asia. The Chinese economy, despite the on-going political difficulties, expanded under the Sung emperors. This was a period of rich, technical, medieval science and cultural achievement. The Sung genius was also reflected in painting, which particularly focused on impressionistic landscape and nature paintings. Due to a decline in Buddhism, religious themes were less in favour. Literature, which had broken new ground in the T'ang dynasty, prospered even more at this time and new forms of literature emerged as a result. There was a rapid increase in schools and academies. The intellectual renaissance of the Sung period is largely explained by the advances in printing and book production, which helped to generate a high level of literacy amongst its people.

Printing led to great advances in scholarship. Vast compilations of classics, early historical records and encyclopaedias began to emerge. Although this activity began with the T'ang dynasty it really took off in the Sung period and has been maintained ever since. In fact, the Chinese are the most assiduous compilers of documents in the world. This literary revolution helped the revival of Confucianism at a time when Buddhism began to lose its dominant grip in China and as scholars and philosophers began to reinterpret the early Chinese philosophical and political ideals. The work of Chu Hsi (1130-1200) was significant in this shift in consciousness, and its impact was such that it dominated the Chinese outlook until the 19th century.

From the Mongols to the Moguls

As stated earlier, Europe's idea of the East was distorted but from time to time during the Middle Ages Europeans were reminded of how small their corner of the world really was. Rumours would come out of the East, of a land which stretched to the very edge of the earth. A land inhabited by restless clans of herdsmen, who lived on their horses and shifted their black hide tents hundreds of miles in their annual quest for new pastures. The men were described as squat and slit-eyed, they were said to have no noses. They worshipped the wind and lived in the wilderness. They were the Mongols, arguably the most devastating wave of conquerors to emerge from central Asia.

They established an empire twice the size of Alexander the Great's, and four times that of the Roman Empire. Their kingdom stretched across Europe and Asia, from Germany in the west to Japan in the east. Their might and influence was felt in the north east on the emerging Russian state. In China Kublai Khan (grandson of Genghis Khan) brought an end to the Sung dynasty. In the Middle East, the empire of Hulagu Khan (c.1216-1265) transformed the Muslim world. This began with Genghis Khan's invasion of Transoxiana in 1219 and was completed by Hulagu Khan's plundering and capturing of Baghdad in 1258.

The Mongols' part in history is an unusual one, as on one hand their crusades and advances were brutal and unforgiving, whilst on the other hand they came to the rescue of Byzantium twice, by all but destroying their Turkish enemies in 1243 in Anatolia and in 1402 by

triumphantly carrying Bayezid, the Ottoman Sultan, off the battlefield at Ankara. Also, it should be said for purposes of balance that for western Christians the Mongols gave the hope of a potential ally to break the Muslim encirclement of Jerusalem. In fact, there has been a long held western belief that the Mongols were led by Prester John, the legendary Christian King of some distant eastern country. This has never been verified and has become the stuff of legend as it is the Mongols' Genghis Khan and his grandson Kublai Khan that are remembered most for their conquests and rulership. Great chronicles have been written about these two world conquerors. After the many conquests listed above, their attention turned to China. In 1213 the Mongols stormed the Great Wall. Within two years Peking fell. By 1222 much of China had been seized.

In fact, this was true of Russia too. Genghis Khan did not maintain rulership of such a vast area by military strategy alone: he had codified Mongol clan law in a book called Yasa (this remained the basis of Mongol moral and civil code until the 20th century). Genghis Khan died in 1227 at the age of 60 but his legacy continued. He left behind a vast kingdom that was well coordinated with efficient communicators and better trade routes between the East and Europe. This led to a variety of nervous - in many cases fruitless - dialogues as the Europeans and Christendom tried to negotiate to see if they could 'tame' the great Mongolian influence. These did not amount to much as the Mongolians sat comfortably in their dominion over their conquests and felt they had the will of God behind them. There is a notable exchange between Pope Innocent IV and Guyuk the Great Khan. When Pope Innocent suggested that the Great Khan be baptized Guyuk said, "How do you know that the words which you speak are with God's sanction? From the rising of the sun to its setting, all lands have been made subject to me. Who can do this against God's will?"

He then ordered the Pope to submit to him and concluded ominously, "If you do not observe God's command and if you ignore my command, I shall know you as my enemy. Likewise, I shall make you understand. If you do otherwise God knows that I know". This illustrates the confidence, or was it arrogance, of the Mongols. There is much more that could be said about their reign but for our purposes we believe this is sufficient. We are concerned here with the re-defining of history, the reshaping of lands, the evolution of languages and the myriad of cultures that have emerged out of the battle between the 'arrogance of the ego' and the 'humility of the spirit'. It is the battle between these two opposing positions which we think has led to our spiritual demise, despite the appearances of progress.

The Chinese conquest by the Mongols, although started by Genghis Khan, was in fact completed by his grandson in 1279, establishing a new dynasty, the Yuan. This dynasty was brutal in conquest and very centralising, ready to use Muslims, Christians, and others from the Mongol conquests in western Asia to supervise Chinese provincial administration in what had become the Mongolian way. Kublai Khan had been very eclectic in his rule, accepting the moral code and philosophy of Confucius as that was already in operation and working. However, Kublai Khan's chameleon-like approach did not last despite the Yuans' attempts to rebuild canals and respect Buddhism as well as the Confucian ideals.

This caused irritation amongst some scholars as there were limited official state appointments offered to non-Chinese individuals. These efforts did not prevent the demise of Mongolian rule in China and opened the door to the Ming dynasty in 1368. The Ming

dynasty ushered in over two hundred and fifty years of stable and relatively prosperous rule. What of India and the Mongols? The attraction and seduction of India continued to exert a pull on those who admired its wealth and mystery. Although in the main it was the physical treasure that drew many invaders, we must not lose sight of the amazing spiritual wealth India has been responsible for offering to the world.

The Mongols had tried to invade North India between 1295 and 1306, devastating the countryside around Delhi in the process, but the Khalji Sultans (of Afghan descent) not only kept the Mongols at bay but caused them to retreat. India didn't have to deal with Genghis Khan, but they had another equally devastating threat of their own; his name was Timur (which means Iran). He became known as Tamerlane. This name was derived from an injury in battle that left him with a limp. He became known as Timur-i-Lang, Timur the Lame or Tamerlane.

Born in 1336 in Transoxiana, he was a Muslim and regarded his conquests as something of a holy war (Jihad), to remind other Muslims (such as the Ottomans) of their duties to Islam. Tamerlane was more ruthless and reckless than Genghis. He built his power base on the remnants of the empire of Genghis Khan. His evolution to power began in a similar way to Genghis', gathering together small nomadic tribes and slowly building an empire from there. Then in quick succession he conquered Transoxiana (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and southwest Kazakhstan), Persia, Syria, Turkistan and most of Asia Minor. In 1398 he proclaimed a holy war against the Infidels, and like many before him, attracted by the wealth of India, descended on her like a vulture securing its prey. Tamerlane was ruthless and at the siege of the Fort of Kator, 10,000 Hindus were killed in an hour. His horrendous signature was left on India in this year long siege as he had all the skulls of the dead heaped into a pile into the shape of a minaret, presumably a symbolic justification of his 'holy war'.

He went on to ransack and capture Delhi in a famous battle with the Sultan Mahmud on the field of Pam'pat. Over 1,000,000 Hindus were massacred. Many thousands were then carried off into slavery and subjected to terrible cruelty. The menace of Tamerlane and his many military acquisitions continued until 1405 when he died. The huge state he created then collapsed. In Persia, those who had followed him (Timurids) held on for a further century (1502), however, in India his descendants ruled as great Moguls from 1526 – 1857.

The Moguls originated from central Asia having come down the same corridor of history as Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, through the Khyber Pass in late 1525. They attacked from Kabul and at the fifth time of trying they breached India's borders and her resistance in another battle played out in Pam'pat. History was clearly repeating itself. The difference here though was that this battle was between a Muslim invader (Barbur) and Muslim incumbent (Ibrahim). This battle unlike previous ones in this part of the world, eventually led to a much-needed peace and a growing religious tolerance. Barbur entered Delhi peacefully and did not repeat the actions of Mahmud Ghazni, who had pillaged the Somnath Temple several centuries earlier. In fact, the Moguls now brought a quiet respect for India and devotion to Sufism that would influence their 330-year reign.

It was the grandson of Barbur (Akbar) who was to become one of India's greatest kings. It was he who would change the relationship between Muslims and Hindus. He was only 13

when he came to the throne in 1556 and although he remained illiterate the whole of his life, he demonstrated unexpected skills in rulership. Over the next 10 years he expanded the Mogul empire in the shadow of the ever-diminishing Mongol empire. He became interested in India's diverse religions and philosophies. It is in this exploration and examination of philosophy and spirituality that his uniqueness as a ruler lies. He was a very different kind of sovereign.

It was Akbar who lifted the much-hated head-tax on Hindus and encouraged religious tolerance by embracing all of India's religions. Once again, we see history repeating itself; Akbar's approach has many similarities to Asoka's reign (273-232BC). He too wanted to see a return to the 'empire of the spirit' not of the sword. During this era there was one clear example of this beautiful ideal... Sikhism.

In the 16th century the Sikh religion emerged out of the ongoing tension between Hinduism and Islam. Their first Guru, Nanak (1469-1539) said: "There is no Hindu or Muslim, we are one and there is only one God". He stressed the need for charity; he didn't believe that renunciation, performance of rites, ceremonies and acts of austerity would lead to enlightenment. For him it was good deeds that paved the way. It is no surprise that the new faith he fostered, called Sikhism, was influenced by the teaching of Islam, Hinduism, Sufism, and the Bhakti saints. The age in which Nanak lived was characterised by political chaos and religious oppression and this influenced his exploration and enquiry. He travelled widely in order to question, challenge and listen to the different philosophical arguments put forward by these faiths. And he reasoned his way to a philosophy that disregarded rituals, rites, and inequality. He did embrace some of Islam, Hinduism, Sufism and Bhakti principles, where they were congruent with his unwavering Monotheism. He considered poetry, art, music, and philosophy to be important, but religion was considered the highest endeavour for attaining spiritual wisdom and knowledge of the eternal truth. Hence his emphasis on charity, worship, hard work and ethical conduct.

Nanak's philosophical ideas are crystallised in numerous songs, hymns and oral discourses which were collectively called the Gurbani, literally meaning the 'Guru's word'. However, the Japji Sahib and Asa Di Var are his most important contributions to Sikhism. They outline the ideas and themes central to Nanak's spiritual and philosophical thought. These are expressed largely through devotional hymns and poetic compositions. The influence of Japji and Asa Di Var continued long after his death. The fifth guru of Sikhism, Arjan Dev, compiled Nanak's poetry in the Adi Granth, which, after the tenth guru (Gobind Singh), came to be known as Guru Granth Sahib. Nanak was passionate about there being only one God who he described as formless, infinite, and immortal – Nirankar.

This is why he disapproved of the idol worship found in Hinduism with its many Gods (polytheism). He felt the proof of God was visible in nature and that he was not subject to the laws of reincarnation as he could not die – he was not subject to decay – he was immortal; and by chanting God's name (Nam) one's sins can be purified. For him there was no ritual in this, this was simply ethical action which is essential if one is to find salvation. He also stressed the need for honesty, kindness, and compassion for it is these virtues that will help man attain wisdom and communion with God. It was because of these principles and values that he

vehemently condemned the Hindu caste system. He believed in a casteless society and for that to be achieved he believed that the ego had to be conquered.

Only when the ego is conquered will all other sins (anger, greed, lust, pride and attachment) fall away, and the spirit of brotherhood and equality take their place. These values resonate with the Sufi saints (who represented the mystical side of Islam) and the Bhakti saints (who could be considered to have offered a similar contribution to Hinduism). Nanak managed to carry this message to the common people, therefore reaching a wider audience making his contribution to the eastern world quite unique. His philosophy broke down barriers and encouraged integration, what he was offering was accessible to all. This offered a feeling of worthiness and self-confidence to the masses, which his nine successors up to and including the last Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, emulated.

Nanak's position and the principles of Sikhism appealed to Akbar, and it was he who donated the land where the Golden Temple in Amritsar was built and still stands today. Akbar said, "it cannot be wisdom to assert the truth of one faith over another", and this was one of many statements that demonstrated his belief in integration. For him "the wise person makes justice his guide and learns from all faiths, only such a person may find the key to 'all' where it had once been lost". This message seems as relevant now as it was 500 years ago...maybe even more so. Akbar's focus was on finding common ground between all faiths. To this end he invited scholars, sages, gurus and priests of all faiths (Jains, Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Jews and Parsees) to discuss and compare their faiths so that the 'truth' might be found. Despite the huge differences in India, he held weekly Satsangs (spiritual gatherings) in order to try and foster religious tolerance. Akbar was doing in the 16th century what no one else in the world was doing at that time. In fact, his efforts pre-date the 'age of enlightenment', that didn't come along for another two hundred years. It is accurate to say that it was he who brought in the 'age of reason' (at the time when Europe was going through the renaissance period). Akbar was a true humanitarian, interested in one religion, equality, and fairness.

He was a visionary; his big ideas would only be pursued in Europe some two hundred years after his death. After a 50-year reign he left a legacy on which the Mogul empire would thrive until the time of the British Empire (in 1857). When he died (1605), India was the wealthiest nation in the world materially, but it could be argued it was also the wealthiest nation spiritually too. Ironically, the promise of an extended 'Golden Age' in India was lost – due again to our old friend 'the ego'. It would be the extravagance of the Moguls and their overindulgence in the 17th century that would eventually lead to their demise, despite their countless achievements in the arts, architecture, science, technology, and literature. India would soon again fall foul of foreign invaders... the British.

In this chapter of history, we see the devastation brought by the Mongols and the Moguls as they sought to impose their will and change the landscape of the East. We also see the desperate attempts by the Sufis and the Sikhs to turn minds and hearts away from war and towards peace and enlightenment. Sadly, the tide of war has kept pushing back the charge of peace and enlightenment, as greed, and the pursuit of power has maintained its force.

“If the human race wishes to have a prolonged and indefinite period of material prosperity, they have only got to behave in a peaceful and helpful way toward one another”.

Winston Churchill (1874 – 1965)

It is Churchill who also said that those who don't learn from their history are destined to make the same mistakes. It's clear as you read through *Antiquity Comes Full Circle* that history keeps repeating itself. Could it be we're simply not listening to what has gone before and therefore think we're living in the present when in fact we continue to be slaves to our pasts?