

Shaykh `Ali al-Hujwiri, *Revealing the Mystery (Kashf al-mahjub)*,
trans. R. A. Nicholson, (reprint ed., N.Y.: Pir Press, 1999).

Foreword

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Shaykh Abu al-Hasan `Ali ibn `Uthman al-Jullabi al-Hujwiri al-Ghaznawi was born in a small town in Afghanistan near Ghazni. He came to Lahore in 1039 during the reign of Sultan Mas`ud, son of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni. In Lahore he would stay until his death in 1073, and such was the gratitude of the people of Lahore for his spiritual gifts that they called him by the simple Hindi name "Data" (meaning "the giver") or else "Data Ganj Bakhsh" ("the giver who bestows treasure"). Few details are known of the life of this man, though he came to exert a significant influence on Muslim spiritual life through his writings, above all the famous *Kashf al-mahjub (The Unveiling of the Concealed)*. His tomb, moreover, which was built by the grandson of Sultan Mahmud, remains an important center for followers of Sufism from all classes. A sign of his importance for Sufism is the small shrine adjacent to Shaykh Hujwiri's tomb, which is known today as the station of Shaykh Mu`in al-Din Chishti. When the latter came from Afghanistan to India in the closing years of the twelfth century, he is said to have stopped to pray and meditate at the tomb of Shaykh Hujwiri to seek permission before going further, since Data Ganj Bakhsh had spiritual authority over the entire Indian subcontinent. Shaykh Mu`in al-Din evidently received permission to proceed, together with the broadest authority, and as a result the Chishti Sufi order is probably the most extensive lineage in South Asia. The ancient mosque near the tomb, which was originally built by Shaykh Hujwiri himself, has recently been reconstructed with

elegant Turkish-style minarets, a modernistic dome, and fine stained glass windows (the latter planned by American architectural designer Jay Bonner), so that it has become a major showcase of modern Islamic architecture. The annual festival of Data Ganj Bakhsh in Lahore, celebrated on his death-anniversary with the support of Pakistan's Ministry of Charitable Trusts, attracts hundreds of thousands of devotees. Politicians, understanding the popular appeal of the saint, have been eager to associate themselves with him; so, for instance, when Benazir Bhutto returned to Pakistan from exile in 1986, her cavalcade headed directly from the airport to Data Durbar, the "court" where this spiritual ruler of Pakistan presides.

Our interest in Shaykh Hujwiri, or Data Sahib, is principally in his book on Sufism. *Kashf al-mahjub* was the first comprehensive book written in Persian about Sufism, at a time when Arabic was still the dominant language for expressing Islamic religious thought. Prior to Shaykh Hujwiri, masters such as Abu Nasr al-Sarraj and Abu Talib al-Makki had written famous Arabic treatises discussing Sufi thought and practice in terms of the standard religious sciences. But Shaykh Hujwiri, who was also known for his Persian poetry, effectively used the elegant and courtly Persian of the Samanid style to convey his message. *Kashf al-mahjub* was a model for the great Sufi biographer Farid al-Din `Attar (d. ca. 1220) when he wrote his *Memorial of the Saints*. The Mughal prince Dara Shikuh wrote in the seventeenth century that none could challenge the fame and greatness of *Kashf al-mahjub*, for it was written from the perspective of the perfect teacher, and it had no equal on the subject of Sufism in the Persian language. `Ali Qawim, editor of the edition of this text published by the Iran-Pakistan Center for Persian Studies in 1978, observed that this book is unparalleled in the beauty of its learned composition, its attractive literary style, and its avoidance of unpleasant and jarring expressions. It is worth mentioning that the superb library of the Iran-Pakistan Center for Persian Studies in Islamabad, which contains over 15,000 Persian manuscripts, was named the Ganj Bakhsh Library in honor of Shaykh Hujwiri.

Kashf al-mahjub is not simply a literary production, however, for it is an exposition of practical Sufism summarizing a wide tradition of centuries of reflection; the author wrote it at the request of a fellow-Sufi from his hometown of Hujwir. *Kashf al-mahjub* is still one of the best descriptions of the Sufi path. It has been said that those who seek a guide in Sufism should do three things: pray for guidance, visit the tombs of the great shaykhs, and read *Kashf al-mahjub*. Shaykh Hujwiri traveled widely and met most of the leading Sufis of his day. Accounts of his personal experiences in Iran, Central Asia, and the Middle East enliven his learned discussion of mysticism. He drew upon writings of well-known Sufis such as Sarraj, Qushayri, and Ansari, and he also had access to many early Sufi writings that no longer exist.

Fully one-third of the book is biographical, tracing the practice of Sufism from the companions of the Prophet Muhammad through subsequent generations to the time of Data Sahib himself. His unusual description of the different schools of thought in early Sufism (in Chapter XIV) is a way of discussing the meditative specialties of leading Sufis. The fact that he uses the theological terminology of handbooks on Islamic sects could give the misleading impression that the early Sufi schools were "sects" in some exclusive doctrinal sense, but that would be an overly rationalistic reading of early Sufism. Readers should also be aware that Shaykh Hujwiri was writing at a time before the emergence of the Sufi orders, and so his description of Sufi teaching reflects the less formal situation that prevailed prior to the establishment of Sufism as a major public force in Muslim societies.

The last and perhaps most interesting part of the book consists of eleven "unveilings" of Sufi practice, and it deals with knowledge of God, the divine unity, faith, purity, prayer, alms, fasting, pilgrimage, the rules of Sufi society, and technical terms. The final chapter describes the principles for listening to Sufi music, the original form of the modern *qanwali* music performed at shrines in India and Pakistan.

Like his predecessor Abu al-Qasim al-Qushayri, Shaykh Hujwiri had adopted the theological teachings of al-Ash`ari, who stressed a rational interpretation of Islam without approaching Greek philosophy as closely as did the Mu`tazili theologians. This theological background gives the argumentation of *Kashf al-mahjub* a systematic appearance, in some cases perhaps overly so. Shaykh Hujwiri evidently had a particular fondness for the sayings of the controversial Sufi martyr Hallaj, about whom he wrote a book, though he regarded Hallaj's experiences as not having reached full maturity. Unfortunately, Shaykh Hujwiri's other writings that are mentioned in *Kashf al-mahjub* have not survived the centuries.

Shaykh Hujwiri appears from his book to have been a kind but irascible person and a shrewd yet forgiving judge of character. The opening paragraphs of *Kashf al-mahjub* show him testily explaining why he has put his name there so prominently. He had made the mistake with two of his previous books of loaning out the original manuscripts to unscrupulous people, who then erased his name and claimed the books as their own work! Shaykh Hujwiri has also captured effectively the hypocrisy of some official representatives of Sufism, as in his description of the wealthy Sufis in Khurasan who threw him rotten melon rinds while they feasted on the best. And he had his difficult moments too. His master Abu al-Fazl al-Khatli (Nicholson spells the name as Khuttali) was a serious and learned recluse whom Shaykh Hujwiri described as the most awe-inspiring man he had ever met, and it was al-Khatli who ordered Shaykh Hujwiri to move from Ghazni to Lahore. Hujwiri arrived just in time to attend the funeral of a fellow disciple and take his place as the resident Sufi of Lahore, but he seems to have come so hastily that he left his beloved library behind. He is said to have written, "My books are all left in Ghazni, and now I am trapped in Lahore with unkind people!" The shock of the move must have worn off quickly, though, for Shaykh Hujwiri became the most beloved Sufi of Lahore, and he is remembered today by thousands who revere him as "the giver who bestows treasure."

The Persian text of *Kashf al-mahjub* has been published several times in Lahore, Deoband, Samarqand, and Tashkent. It has been rendered in several Urdu translations as well as into Arabic.¹ The best critical edition of the Persian text was published in Leningrad by the Russian Orientalist, Valentin Zhukovski, in 1926, and it has frequently been reprinted in Iran.² The English-reading public has had access to the excellent translation of R. A. Nicholson, first published in 1911, and frequently reprinted both in England and in Pakistan. It is this translation that is once again presented to the public, for those who are interested in the sources of Sufi spirituality.

Nicholson's translation was one of the best achievements of the European Orientalist scholarship of its time. Based on Persian manuscripts in British libraries, it was abridged to some extent, occasionally leaving out parallel examples or Qur'anic quotations in order to stick more closely to the main argument. In addition to its learned translation of the Persian text (and the numerous Arabic quotations that it contains), Nicholson's version also supplied two valuable indexes of names and terms, to help the reader find the way. But this translation was also subject to some of the limitations that afflicted old-fashioned Orientalism. Occasionally Nicholson could not help making condescending Eurocentric remarks, such as when he observed in his Preface, "The logic of a Persian Sufi must sometimes appear to European readers curiously illogical" (p. xvi). Like other scholars of his generation, Nicholson believed that Sufism was not really a part of Islam, but was somehow grafted on from some Indian or Greek source. As I have argued elsewhere, this was a stratagem by which scholars justified their interest in Sufi literature while retaining the long-standing European bias against Islam.³ Contemporary Chishti Sufi leaders in Pakistan have criticized Nicholson for his assumption that Sufi

¹ The Arabic version is by Dr. Is`ad `Abd al-Hadi Qandil (Cairo, 1974).

² The most recent reprint of Zhukovsky's edition has a lengthy new introduction by Qasim Ansari (Tehran: Tuhuri, 1979).

³ Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1997).

doctrine and practice was some kind of later deviation from pristine Islam; they maintain that it is in fact Sufism that provides the surest guide to the true meaning of the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. In that spirit, my dear friend, the late Capt. Wahid Bakhsh Sial Rabbani, produced a new complete English translation and commentary on Shaykh Hujwiri's *Kashf al-mahjub*, which has recently been published in Malaysia; there he quoted his fellow-Chishti, Hadhrat Shahidullah Faridi, on Nicholson's misunderstandings.⁴ Nevertheless, Capt. Wahid Bakhsh also acknowledged that it was Nicholson's translation of *Kashf al-mahjub* that in 1935 inspired the conversion to Islam of a young Englishman named Lennard, who later became a Chishti master under his Muslim name Shahidullah Faridi. So it might be concluded that even works produced with an Orientalist edge can have a personal impact, in which the spiritual power or *baraka* of the original text comes through.

Sufism is a subject that continues to be hotly debated in Muslim societies even as it takes on a new cultural and spiritual importance in Europe and America. For those who are curious about how this remarkable tradition started, there are few resources available that have the authority and depth of information contained in *Kashf al-mahjub*. Those who take the time to study *Kashf al-mahjub* will be grateful to Shaykh Hujwiri for his superb description of the inner life of Sufism.

⁴ Syed `Ali bin Uthman al-Hujwiri, *The Kashful Mahjub: "Unveiling the Veiled", The Earliest Persian Treatise on Sufism*, trans. Maulana Wahid Bakhsh Sial Rabbani (Kuala Lumpur: A. S. Noordeen, 1997), pp. xvi-xvii. It is worth noting that Shahidullah Faridi himself wrote a preface to an earlier reprint of the English version of Nicholson that was published in Lahore (ibid., p. xv). As with all important texts, the existence of more than one translation is a boon for those unfamiliar with the original, and comparison of this new version with Nicholson's will help reveal many interesting points.