

**Pir-o-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan:
Universal Sufism and the Unity of Religious Ideals**

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The Sufi Message given by Pir-o-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan has come to be known as Universal Sufism, since it does not require adherence to any particular religion. Sufism has been known in the West as the mystical branch of Islam, requiring adherence to Islam. But the Sufi Message has a different approach to mysticism; one which is open to sincere practitioners of all religions (or of no religion). This is the teaching of the Unity of Religious Ideals. Murshid's teaching was always Universalist, for he understood all religions to be expressions of One Being, who has been known by many names. He affirmed that each authentic prophet gives the Message in the language and clothing of his or her own time and place. And he affirmed that the Message he was giving embodied the essence of mysticism, in the language and clothing of the twentieth century. In order to look at the Universal Message he brought, we will first consider Murshid's experience of coming from India to the Western world, the conditions of Western society and culture, and the "mentality of the day". Then we can see how the principle of the Unity of Religious Ideals expresses a new divine impulse meant to create better conditions in our world.

Pir-o-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan came to the West in 1910, at the behest of his Murshid, to bring a Message founded on principles of the Unity of Religious Ideals and of Spiritual Liberty. Of course, first he had to learn the religious and social culture of Europe and America so that he could give the Message in a manner that would transform hearts. In his autobiography he writes:

"I found my work in the West the most difficult task that I have ever imagined. To work in the West for a spiritual Cause to me was like travelling in a hilly land, not like sailing in the sea, which is smooth and level. In the first place I was not a missionary of a certain faith, delegated to the West by its adherents, not was I sent to the West as a representative of an Eastern cult by some Maharaja. I came to the West with His

Message, Whose call I received, and there was nothing earthly to back me on my mission, except my faith in God and trust in Truth."

(Inayat Khan, Biography of Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan, London: East-West Publications, 1979, p. 179.)

[All quotations, except where indicated, are from this book.]

Here he acknowledges that he did not come as part of an Eastern religious organization, nor did he plan to propagate any particular religious tradition. He did not intend to create a Sufi lineage or esoteric school in his own name. He came to carry the direct revelation that he had personally realized, which had been authenticated by his Murshid.

He writes about his observations of the cultural and intellectual world that he encountered.

"Materialism on one side, commercialism on the other, besides their agitation against their Church, and their interest in the thought of their modern philosophers turned Europeans, if not from God, at least from the God of Beni Israel. I found that a man to-day in the West is agitated, not only against the church, but also against the autocrat God, Who works without a Parliament and no one before His government has a vote, Who judges people and punishes them for their sin, and before Whom men are supposed to be presented in the hereafter with their lives' records of deeds. The man in the Western world, who cannot stand even a king over his head, naturally rebels against a God to be considered as an Emperor of emperors. The modern man does not want anyone to be superior to himself; a priest, savior, or god, none of them he cares for. If there is anything that appeals to him it is to know of the divine character to be found in the innermost nature of man. The man today is absolutely against a spiritual hierarchy and therefore naturally against the head of the hierarchy, who is God. (p. 133)

Following the democratic revolutions in the eighteenth century in Europe and America, people were skeptical and critical of systems of political or religious governance. People were suspicious of hierarchy, and hesitant to believe in any concept of God that required faith. Murshid describes people in the West as agitated in their thought. The idea of democracy, understood by people who were agitated and suspicious, had contributed to a refusal to see anyone as superior to

oneself. Not a priest or a god. And reason and science shaped the collective rejection of religion, which then allowed the external values of commercialism and materialism to become social ideals.

He goes on to describe the intellectual conflicts inherent in the “mentality of the day.”

[T]here are many among the most intelligent people who do not believe in God, soul, hereafter. And the few who think, perhaps there is something which they do not know ... do not openly admit their belief, fearing that they will appear to be illogical and will not be ranked among the intelligent. They are most anxious to know about the Truth which their soul longs to know, and yet most diffident to show themselves in any way interested or to give themselves in the search of that Truth. It is not their fault, it is the mentality of the day. I had the greatest difficulty to modify my teachings, which are of democratic spirit but of aristocratic form, to those quite opposed to the presentation of the God-ideal in religious form. For me, therefore, there was a ditch on one side and water on the other. The religious man thought he had a religion, I was intruding on his belief. The unbeliever thought I was interfering with his disbelief, which he continually guarded against invasions. (p.133)

So he found that neither the believer nor unbeliever were open to a mystical Message that represented the God-ideal in religious form. It was hard for Westerners to be open to the idea that there was something that they could not know through reason. Though some people wanted to connect with their soul’s longing for Truth, they were afraid to become a student, to surrender to a person or teaching that required faith or confidence in God. They were afraid that the Message would intrude on their individual rights.

After spending some time in America, giving concerts of Indian music, and lectures on music and mysticism, he moved to England. He continued with his musical presentations, while also establishing a Sufi Center (a Khankah) in Kensington from about 1914 – 1920, throughout World War I. He also founded another movement, the Anjuman Islam, that was intended for London Indian Muslims who sympathized with his ideas, but did not want to join the Sufi Order. But in Britain, he encountered great prejudice against Islam and against Indians. Since

Sufism was only understood to be a part of Islam, and since he was a Muslim from India, he was thought to be preaching the religion of Islam. Now, while Murshid had great respect for Islam, he understood that Islam could not be accepted in the Western world. He understood the historical fear of Islam in Europe from the time of the Muslim invasions of the eighth century. And he saw the conflicts between Christianity and Islam since both are missionizing religions. But more importantly, he did not come as a religious missionary, intending to preach Islam. He said,

“Naturally I could not tell them that it is a Universal Message of the time, for every man is not ready to understand this.” (p. 179)

Other factors shaped British political attitudes after the War. Gandhi began his non-cooperation campaign, which was part of his plan to lead India to gain Independence from the British Empire. This led to increased suspicion and surveillance of Indians by the British government.

At the same time, the Khalifat Movement (1919-1922) had become active. The Khalifat movement arose because of Muslim concern for the integrity of Islam, after the defeat of Turkey in World War I. Indian Muslims led a campaign to pressure the British government to preserve the authority of the Ottoman Sultan as Caliph of Islam, following the breakup of the Ottoman Empire. This led to increased suspicion of Muslims by the British government.

And some other Muslims in Britain resented Murshid when he did not join their political cause. He said:

“My own people, who found me busy with something quite different from what they would have expected from me, looked at me and my work with antipathy, and from many of them harm came to me, to add to the many difficulties I had to face. Therefore in my struggle in the West instead of the support of the East, I had to face opposition. (P. 182)

In 1920, Murshid left Britain and traveled to Switzerland where he found a cultural attitude that was less suspicious of his Message of Universal Sufism. He described the purpose of the Message in this way.

“The Sufi Message has as its main mission to consider the problems of the day, and then to direct our activity to do what is necessary in order to bring about better conditions, in which is the fulfillment of our mission.”

(Complete Works of Pir-o-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan. Original Texts: lectures on Sufism 1922 II: September – December.)

In Switzerland he founded the Sufi Movement. This organization offered a structure for the five Activities of the Sufi Message. Three of these activities are the Brotherhood activity (which we now call the Brotherhood/Sisterhood activity), the Universal Worship activity, and the Inner School. Each of these activities is necessary for the Message to fulfill its mission. He intentionally did not found an esoteric school (tariqa) as a separate activity or as a separate organization. The esoteric mystical work of self-realization was one aspect of the Message, a very important aspect. It is this aspect which Murshid had noted was of interest to some people in the West, the search for inner Truth. But they were diffident to commit to anything which had a religious form.

Murshid taught a new understanding of the place of religion. While not rejecting any of the established religions, he said that in our times, we needed to understand the Unity of Religious Ideals. This means that while prophetic religions are different in their language, symbols, rituals, and doctrines, due to the differences in the societies and cultures in which they developed, the mystical source and Ideal of all religions is the same; it is the One Being. When a person studies different religions deeply, going to the essence of the religion, one discovers this One Being. Realizing this, one can see the need to develop understanding of different religions. Understanding can then lead to tolerance. For in the world, people do speak of the Divine Presence with different names; they honor different prophets and saints, say different prayers, practice different rituals, and believe different doctrines. Murshid identified misunderstanding and intolerance as important “problems of the day” in the early twentieth century. And we can see in our own twenty-first century that these problems have become worse. Without tolerance and understanding of people who are different from our own selves, fear and hatred of the “other” expands and grows. Whether these differences are of gender, race, nationality, political ideology, or religion, hatred leads to violence, which creates terror and more fear.

Realizing the Unity of Religious Ideals, a student of Universal Sufism seeks understanding of the Sacred Scriptures of the world's religions. We are open to the sacredness of the Quran, the Torah, the New Testament, the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanisads, the Dhammapada, the Sacred Book of Nature, to mention only a few sacred scriptures. It is, of course, a daunting task to study all of the world's scriptures, but we can respect them, and try to feel the way in which the One Being is manifesting from each perspective.

This teaching of the Unity of Religious Ideals has come to us through the deep inspiration of Hazrat Inayat Khan, and has been given to us as a gift to address the problems of our time. It may be considered as a Revelation, for our times, that can help us to bring balance to our world. For the Universality of the Message guides us beyond doctrinal loyalty to any one religion against others. It guides us to see our common humanity as manifestations of One Being. It guides us to care about and protect all existence, and to cultivate loving kindness in our world.

