

St. Francis of Assisi's Sufi Connection



"What everyone is in the eyes of God, that he is no more."
- *When St. Francis of Assisi was praised by anyone, this was his reply*

Most people know that **St. Francis of Assisi** was a lighthearted troubadour of Italy who experienced a religious conversion and became a saint with an uncanny influence over animals and birds. It is on record that the **troubadours** were a relic of Saracenic musicians (Saracen, an archaic name for Muslims used by Europeans) and poets. It is often agreed that the rise and development of the monkish Orders in the middle ages was greatly influenced by the penetration of Moslem dervish organization in the West. Studying St. Francis from this point of view, certain interesting discoveries become possible.

Francis was born in 1182, the son of Pietro Bernardone, a merchant, and his wife, Madonna Pica. He was originally named Giovanni, but his father was so attached to France (where he spent much of his commercial life) that "for love of the land he had just quitted" he renamed the child Francesco.

Although considered an Italian, Francis spoke Provençal, the language used by the troubadours. There is little doubt that he felt in the spirit of the troubadours a glimpse of something deeper than appeared on the surface. St. Francis' own poetry so strongly resembles in places that of the love poet Rumi that one is tempted to look for any report which might connect Francis with the Sufi order of the Whirling Dervishes.

Rumi's school of Whirling Dervishes was in full operation in Asia Minor, and its founder was still alive, during the lifetime of St. Francis.

Here is the puzzling "spinning" tale: Francis was walking through Tuscany with a disciple, Brother Masseo. They arrived at a fork in the road. One path led to Florence, another to Arezzo, a third to Siena.

Masseo asked which branch they should take. "The road which God wills."
"And which is that?" "We will know by a sign. I command you, by your path of obedience, turn round and round as children do, until I tell you to stop." So poor Masseo twirled and twirled, till he fell down from giddiness. Then he got up and looked beseechingly at the saint; but the saint said nothing, and Masseo, remembering his vow of obedience, began again to twirl his best. He

continued to twirl and to fall for some time, till he seemed to have spent all his life in twirling, when, at last, he heard the welcome words: "Stop, and tell me whither your face is turned." "To Siena," gasped Masseo, who felt the earth rock round him.

"Then to Siena we must go," said Francis, and to Siena they went.



That Francis felt the source of his troubadour inspiration to lie in the East, and that he was connected with the Sufis, seems clear from much evidence. When he went to the Pope, trying to have his Order accepted, he used a parable which shows that he must have been thinking in terms of the orphaning of a tradition and the need to reestablish its reality.

The phrases which he uses in the parable are of Arabia, and the terminology, of a King and his court, of a woman and her sons in the desert, is not Christian but Saracen (Muslim).

"Francis," says Bonaventura, recording an audience with Pope Innocent, "came armed with a parable. "There was," he said, "a rich and mighty king who took to wife a poor but very beautiful woman, who lived in a desert, in whom he greatly delighted and by whom he had children who bore his image. When her sons were grown their mother said to them, "My sons, be not ashamed; ye are the children of a King." And she sent them to the court, having supplied them with all necessaries. When they came to the King, he admired their beauty; and seeing in them some resemblance to himself, he asked them, "Whose sons are ye?" When they replied that they were the sons of a poor woman dwelling in the desert, the King, filled with much joy, said, "Fear not, ye are my sons, and if I nourish strangers at my table, how much more you, who are my legitimate children."

The tradition that the Sufis are the esoteric Christians out of the desert, and that they are the children of a poor woman (Hagar, wife of Abraham, because of their Arab descent) fits completely with the probability that Francis had tried to explain to the Pope that the Sufi stream represented Christianity in a continuing form.

At his first meeting with the Pope, we are told, Francis did not make much impression, and he was sent away. Immediately afterward, however, the Pope had a strange dream. He saw "a palm tree gradually grow up at his feet until it grew a goodly stature, and as he gazed upon it wondering what the vision might mean, a divine illumination impressed on the mind of the Vicar

of Christ that this palm tree signified the poor man whom he had that day driven from his presence."

The palm tree is the symbol used by the Sufis, and this dream is probably the consequence of Francis using it as an analogy during his audience.

In the early part of the thirteenth century, Pope Innocent III, convinced of the validity of the saint's mission, granted permission for the foundation of the Minor Brothers, or Franciscans. The "Lesser Brethren," considered to be a title assumed from pious humility, might lead one to ask whether there was any Order known as the "Greater Brethren." If so, what might the connection be?



The only people known in this way who were contemporary with St. Francis were the Greater Brothers, an appellation of the Sufi Order founded by Najmuddin Kubra, "the Greater." The connection is interesting. One of the major characteristics about this great Sufi teacher was that he had an uncanny influence over animals. Pictures of him show him surrounded by birds. He tamed a fierce dog merely by looking at it - just as St. Francis is said to have cowed the wolf in a well-known tale. Najmuddin's miracles were well known throughout the East sixty years before St. Francis was born.

When he was thirty, Francis decided to try to reach the East, and specifically Syria, which abutted upon the area of Asia Minor where the Whirling Dervishes were established. Prevented by financial troubles, he returned to Italy. Then he started out again, this time toward Morocco. He set off with a companion and traversed the whole kingdom of Aragon in Spain, though nobody can say why he did this, and some biographers are actually puzzled. Spain was very much penetrated with Sufi ideas and schools.

The atmosphere and setting of the Franciscan Order is closer to a dervish organization than anything else. Apart from the tales about St. Francis which are held in common with Sufi teachers, all kinds of points coincide. The special methodology of what Francis calls "holy prayer" indicates an affinity with the dervish "remembering," quite apart from the whirling. The dress of the Order, with its hooded cloak and wide sleeves, is that of the dervishes of Morocco

and Spain. Like the Sufi teacher Attar, Francis exchanged his garb with a mendicant. He saw a seraph with six wings, an allegory used by Sufis to convey the formula of the bismillah.

Francis refused to become a priest. Like the Sufis, he enrolled into his teaching laymen, and again like the Sufis but unlike the Church, he sought to spread the movement among all the people, in some form of affiliation. This was "the first reappearance in the Church, since its full hierarchical establishment, of the democratic element - the Christian people, as distinguished from the simple sheep to be fed, and souls to be ruled."

The striking thing about the rules laid down by Francis was that, like the Sufis and unlike the ordinary Christians, his followers were not to think first of their own salvation. This principle is stressed again and again among the Sufis, who consider regard for personal salvation to be an expression of vanity.

He "began his preaching everywhere with the salutation which God, he said, had revealed to him - "The peace of God be with you." This is, of course, an Islamic salutation.

- from *The Sufis and Francis of Assisi* by Idres Shah



Tomb of St. Francis of Assisi, may God be well pleased with him

