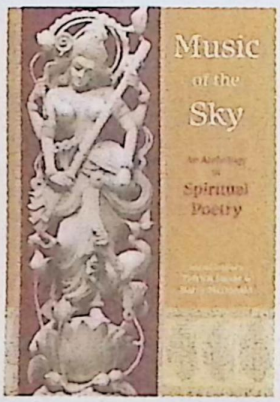
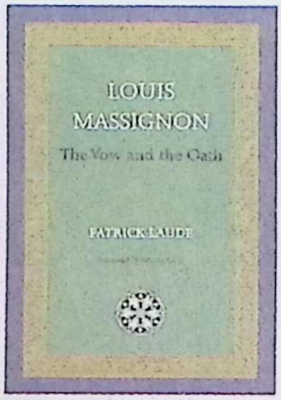
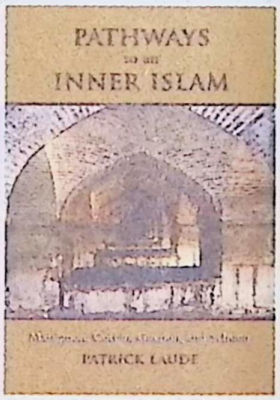
Food for the Soul

UPASHANA SALAM







Spirituality is individual. Your relationship with your creator can only be defined by you and nobody else. All one needs to do is look within themselves, find their centre and concentrate on it to feel one with the powers above. That's what spirituality is all about, says scholar, author and teacher Patrick Laude.

Laude, born in France in 1958, has taught classes on mystical literature and poetry, comparative religion, including Christianity, Islam and Sufism at different junctures in his life. He is currently a Professor at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar. An expert on comparative mysticism, and Western interpretation of Islam and Eastern tradition, Laude has several published books to his name, including Pathways to an Inner Islam: Massignon, Corbin, "Guénon and Schuon," "Divine Play, Sacred Laughter," and "Spiritual Understanding and Singing the Way: Insights into Poetry and Spiritual Transformation," among others. *The Star* Magazine caught up with the writer and teacher at the recently concluded Hay Festival to have a better understanding of what spirituality actually means.

What do you mean when you talk about inner Islam in your book 'Pathways to Inner Islam?'

There are three realities in Islam, so to speak. Islam, itself, which is the practice or the Shahadah, Iman which is the acceptance and total devotion to God, his prophets and angels and Ihsaan, which can be translated as excellence, which means to worship god as if you are seeing him as he sees you. In other words, Ihsaan is to live under the eyes of God, so to speak, or in the presence of God. Inner Islam would be the constant awareness of living in the presence of God. It is going beyond the Shariah itself, not rejecting it, but going through it to reach this inner being which is the ultimate goal of Islam. Islam is 'tauhid', which is unification. That doesn't only refer to the belief that God is one but that we have to become one, we have to unify our faculties, centre them on God. That's what you can call Sufism or Islamic mysticism and I call it inner Islam.

So you are trying to say that it's basically about exploring within yourself to find the spiritual being?

Yes, definitely. It would be called the 'aatman' or the 'paramatmaan', which is the self of all selves, in the Hindu culture. In Islam, it is a bit different though. In Islam, the focus is on the relationship between the servant and the 'Rab' or the lord. There is a duality here. In Sufism, at least, through the sincerity of his worship, the servant extinguishes into the one; he disappears, so to speak. Something that we would call 'fanaah.' Of course it doesn't mean that he vanishes into air but it means that his ego gives way.

You've often spoke of the "egolessness of self." In today's world, how is it possible to reach that 'egolessness' without being a hermit living in forests?

Most Hindu gurus and Sufi masters teach that in principle you don't need to leave the world to attain egolessness. You could have a job and still be on a spiritual path. But it requires a certain disciple of the mind. You have to introduce some changes in your life, especially considering the modern life which is so complex and distracting. You have to set a time where you return to your centre. You have to meditate, practice so that these contemplating sessions drive you to integrate this spirituality into the rest of your life. Ultimately, of course, the goal should be to have an awareness of God at any time and situation. That would be perfection. But it's not something that you can force yourself to attain. However, you can take