

Beyond cultural barriers, Islamic mysticism and intercultural insights

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1. Prologue

Mysticism is one of the main elements in the history of most cultures, particularly in cultures based on world religions. A great number of studies of world mysticism have been conducted in recent decades. This research shows that despite the numerous differences in continental conditions, historical experiences, language and other cultural elements in the mysticisms of ›world religions‹¹, common roots and principles can be recognized; for example Rudolf Otto has compared Eckhart and Śaṅkara,² Dāryūš Šāyegān has compared Islam and Hinduism,³ and Toshihiko Izutsu has drawn a considerable comparison between Lao Tzu and Ibn ʿArabī.⁴

Under the title of the »experience of Being« or the single experience, Karl Albert has considered the main concepts of mysticism in Daoism, Hinduism, Christianity and Greek thinkers before Socrates under the heading of »philosophical mysticism«.⁵ A book by Wolz-Gottwald offering a brief report on the similarities of the emergent mysticisms in

1 The expression ›world religions‹ is used to refer to great traditional mysticisms such as Daoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and also Jewish, Christian and Islamic mysticism so as to make a distinction between our topic here and what has recently become known as ›new-emerging mysticisms‹.

2 See Otto 1926.

3 See Šāyegān 1384/2005.

4 See Izutsu 1984.

5 See Albert 1996.

six world religions is a helpful introduction to the wider research in this respect.⁶ In Iran, it is a few decades that much attention has been given to the comparative studies of mysticism. One of the most important examples is the dialogue between a few Iranian university scholars with one of the latest prominent figures of Islamic mysticism, ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabāyī (d. 1981). Šāyegān gives an account out of these dialogues as follows:

During these studies, we read the Gospels in translation, the Persian Upanishads narrative, Dara Shikoh’s interpretation, the Sutras of Buddhists and Tao De Jing by Lao Tzu sequentially. Dr. S. H. Nasr and I translated the latest book into Persian hastily and re-read it before Allamah. He interpreted these texts as an intelligent spiritual sage, and he found solace in Hindu thoughts as much as the Chinese and Japanese spiritual world. He never found anything in these ideas to be in fundamental contrast with Islamic mysticism with which he was quite familiar and habituated. He saw the grand subtleties of soul in these texts. When the contemplation on the perplexing thought of Lao Tzu which was full of wonderful paradoxes came to an end, he told us it was the deepest and purest book out of all the other texts we have ever read together.⁷

For those who emphasize intercultural perception and philosophy, mysticism should be considered very significant, especially when the new emerging mysticisms in different cultures are examined comparatively. If we consider the growing concern for mysticism and spirituality in most countries of the world, the importance of the matter and its potential to stimulate dialogue and mutual understanding is more striking. In this article, based on the relation between Islamic mysticism and Iranian culture, we will discuss some of its potentials and possibilities for playing a role in the field of intercultural thinking.

2. Mysticism and emancipative orientation

The common specificity of all world mysticisms is their endeavor to emancipate us from multiplicity and to achieve the unity which is the essence and basis of all creatures. Every human being comes into a different part of the world possessing certain proportions. A person without a link to a world and without any dependence on its possibilities lacks a fundamental sense of identity and personality. Heidegger’s equation of

⁶ See Wolz-Gottwald 2011.

⁷ Šāyegān 1381/2002, p. 45.

Dasein with »being in the world« implies that the person without a world cannot possess identity and boundedness.⁸ But at a certain stage this »being in the world« can impede release and the perception of different human possibilities. It means, to perceive various possibilities should be between negation and affirmation, and between proof and denial. In other words, the human being has an identity and needs to transcend this to perceive other possibilities to widen his or her existence through this transcendence. Many of the current processes in our time point to the importance of this awareness and the necessity of the path between the self-realm and ›the other‹. This principle is the spirit of intercultural perception and philosophy introduces here. Therefore, much importance should be ascribed to the traditions which emphasize transcendence and traverse between the worlds. It seems that the major world mysticisms, as expressed in the works of their representatives, have all shown signs of acknowledging this. Almost all great scholars in history, mystics above all, had shown a consideration of ›self‹ and ›the other‹ and the necessity of transcending one's knowledge and possession and opening the gates to embrace the other. In Persianate world, this insight and attitude is reflected in the works of mystics such as Rūmī (d. 1273), Ḥāfiẓ (d. ca. 1390), ʿAṭṭār (d. 1221), al-Ḥaraqānī (d. 1033) and al-Ḥallāğ (d. 922).

In our own time, one of our needs is to reinforce the traditions that push the followers of a culture closer to the »in-between« position. This means the ability to stand in the middle between one's own and other cultures. Among these, mysticism is the most important in Iranian-Islamic culture. Mysticism maintains a radical coherence with its culture and opens the way for understanding other cultures. The emergent philosophies and mysticisms in different cultures are the expression of the efforts of elites in those cultures to transcend the world and the relations formed by habit and imitation. In philosophy this endeavor takes the form of a path toward self-consciousness and exploring the knowledge of other cultures. But in mysticism, the main purpose is to transcend multiplicities and obligations, and to achieve a unity beyond what people are accustomed to, based on nature, history and their surroundings. Seeking redemption has been the common effort of all people in all periods, one form of which has manifested itself in mystical orders. Thus, the attempts made by Lao Tzu, Buddha, Meister Eckhart and Maulānā Rūmī can be seen to be closely related.

⁸ See Heidegger ¹1927/1986, p. 53.

The main subject of mysticism is ›the human being‹. The human, regardless of whether he or she belongs to Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, and Indian culture, is the addressee of mysticism. All forms of mysticism have common themes: drawing people's attention to self-understanding, not solely occupied by mundane life, and introducing spiritual horizons that humans can achieve. In addition, mysticism, more than any other tradition, reduces the notion of distinction and difference, and at a deeper level it demonstrates the proximity and affinity between human beings. There is a great amount of evidence for this throughout history. The mystics of all ages, whether Christian, Muslim or Hindu, could understand the language of each other better than other sects, viewing others with more tolerance and forbearance and taking the path of sympathy and companionship. Furthermore, mystical traditions have relied on an affectionate look at ›the other‹. The mystics have attended to the sufferings of being human and they have called on us to view each other with sympathy and compassion.

Mysticisms in different cultures have emerged differently. Probably the purest form of mysticism without any religious obligations, canons and regulations and requirements can be seen in Daoism. Mysticisms based on their founders' experiences often take very pure forms initially. But then after developing into orders and traditions, they have taken historical forms and become influenced by the other elements of those cultures, their social and political conditions and the events of their time. For this reason, major mysticisms have always been subject to divergence and divisions and thus revivalists have emerged to maintain them through time. An example of this is Buddha and his order. Buddha's experience is a simple one for which for centuries every Buddhist has lived and contemplated in order to repeat it. However, after him Buddhism ran into great multiplicities and divergences. While mysticisms are the sign of the human endeavor to emancipate him from obligations, on the other hand they take on the complexion of the culture in which they have grown and the history in which they have developed. Therefore, for every kind of study of mysticism, we should first of all separate these two modes. In research that aims to be a basis for intercultural perception, the historical course of a particular tradition and the way its historical possibilities and modes emerged should be recognized, and then relying on the experiences and fundamental perceptions of that tradition, we should transcend its requirements and obligations to empower that tradition to reveal its

potentials and capabilities for a dialogue with others and for encountering the problems of the contemporary world.

3. A historical glance at Sufism

Islam is not necessarily mystical. We know that Muḥammad prepared for his prophecy in a mystical manner involving seclusion and long meditation and it was after a period of solitude and contemplation that the angel of revelation descended on him and declared his prophecy. But the prophet's mission was not limited just to his piety and acquisition of spiritual accomplishments, like the founders of Eastern religions and mysticisms such as Lao Tzu and Buddha and even Jesus Christ. The prophet of Islam began his teaching from the outset in order to modify social relations and create social justice. His teachings were mostly moral, canonical and social. He initially defended the oppressed against tyrants and invited people to worship the one God rather than the idols. Then he established a new government to exercise the tenets of his religion. A short while after his triumph in Arabian Peninsula, the Prophet invited the emperors of Iran and Rome to Islam. Islam in its long history has expanded among different peoples from East to West in a variety of ways.

What we refer to as Islamic mysticism and Sufism was not expressed explicitly by the Prophet himself. All the Sufis who supported their interpretations with the Prophet's words were active at least a few decades after he passed away. This point is so important that the Japanese researcher on Islam, Morimoto, believes that if we examine what was originally introduced as Islam, we should consider the Sufis' practices and manners as a kind of heresy.⁹ This has also been the position of a great number of sects and leaders of orders within the Islamic world.

But in considering the history of Sufism and the way it appeared and developed, we should firstly turn to the people who were recognized as the original Sufis. The first order of Sufis was pious and tended to extreme virtue, seclusion and meditation like the mystics of the East. Their narratives are very simple and rudimentary.¹⁰ The first deep words expressed by Sufis belong to the second Islamic century which, according to abundant scholarship, have been influenced by eastern and Christian

⁹ See Morimoto 1383/2004, p. 69.

¹⁰ See as-Sulamī 1986, pp. 1-36.

mysticisms and ancient Iranian »royal wisdom«. ¹¹ In analyzing the roots of Sufism, we can concede that there has been a mystical interpretive background in the Quran, the prophet's sayings and some of the traditions of the immaculate leaders, especially 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. However, the great question is why mysticism did not come into existence in Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam, or in some originally Arabic countries. Sufism originated and grew in regions where the context of pre-Islamic mysticisms existed, ranging from Iran, Central Asia, minor Asia to the Indian peninsula and Northern Africa, which were acquainted with Eastern mysticisms, Christian mysticism and ancient Greece theosophies.

Islam in such regions as Iran has always taken on a mystical complexion. This mystical tendency has always been represented in literature, poetry, general ethics and arts and even in philosophy. Iranian Islamic Mysticism in all its modes have been the manifestation of Iranians' desire for deliverance from different obligations and constraints; Mysticism has been the most significant atmosphere for the aspirations of Iranian poets and scholars, from al-Ḥallāğ and Abū Sa'īd-i Abū l-Ḥair (d. 1049) and al-Ḥaraqānī to 'Aṭṭār and Rūmī and tens of commentators of Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240).

That mysticism found its proper language gradually and employed cryptic terms, whereas there were no such allusions in the religion that came into Iran from Arabia. That all great mystics approved al-Ḥallāğ's great *ṣaṭḥ*¹², which was deemed blasphemy and even the reason for his execution, indicates the emergence of a great tradition of mysticism even across great distances of time and place.

On the other hand, Islamic mystics have always had influential and powerful rivals. Their major rivals had been the sanctimonious, the ascetics, and philosophers. Great mystics have thought of emancipation more than anything else, especially freedom from the ordinary restrictions and constraints and from imitative piety. Mystics would sometimes achieve intuitions that contrasted with customary beliefs. They employed

¹¹ The title of »royal wisdom« (pers. *ḥikmat-i ḥusravānī*) is adapted from Šihāb ad-Dīn as-Suhrawardī (d. 1191), also known as *Šaiḥ al-išrāq*, and is attributed to the mystic philosophers before Islam. In his opinion, the essence of this wisdom appeared after Islam in Sufis such as Bāyazīd Baṣṭāmī (d. 848 or 875), Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ḥaraqānī and Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāğ. Having drawn such a link between these philosophers and Zoroaster, Zarrīnkūb recognizes Zoroaster as an »ancient Iranian Sufi« (see Zarrīnkūb 1375/1996, p. 23).

¹² *Ṣaṭḥ* means here extraordinary words, that differ from regular accepted and orthodox belief, like the famous statement of al-Ḥallāğ, who said: »I am the Truth (*anā l-ḥaqq*).«

a special terminology which had emerged over time. Persian literature, particularly poetry, contains the most fantastic arrays and devices and the most delicate phrases for the expression of mystical perceptions.

4. Expansion of mysticism in Iran

Mysticism in Iran in any form has had a relation to Iranian culture and besides all its indications, it has been a manifestation of this nation's endeavor to safeguard and protect the elements and characteristics of its culture against the dominant culture. When Iranians were defeated by Arabs, they were in perplexity for a time, trying to process the event. Zarrīnkūb, who has termed this period »two silent centuries«, describes the state of the defeated Iranian culture in his book with same title (*Du qarn sukūt*).¹³ During the early centuries after Islam, Iranian history shows the struggle of this culture to reconcile itself with its new situation while preserving its own identity. After the period of silence, Iranians began their serious efforts. They welcomed Islam as a religion which defended the essential rights of humans to freedom and equality. The most famous and moderate account of the Iranian response against Islam is an analysis presented under the title *Interactional services of Islam and Iran* written by Murtaẓā Muṭahharī (d.1979). But this religion which has entered history had to transform itself into a civilization and culture suited to its original doctrines in order to persist. Iranians played one of the most important roles in the creation of Islamic civilization. They were concerned with two different challenges in this period: firstly, processing and absorbing the principles of the newly-emergent ideology, and secondly, safekeeping their own identity as far as possible. Through all the achievements of Iranians we can trace these two concerns. One of the great endeavors of the Iranians was the establishment and promotion of mystical and philosophical schools. Even among the Sufis of the first orders, from the second century onward, Iranians preceded Arabs.¹⁴ Philosophy also seemed to be nonexistent and uncultivated without Iranians.

Iranian elites, through experience and over time, have found that in mysticism they can provide an area for spiritual endeavor and at the same time a space for the freedom of speech and expression of a liberal

¹³ See Zarrīnkūb 1379/2000.

¹⁴ See as-Sulamī 1986.

lifestyle using a special language that can function in different poetic forms, including theosophy and vulgar speech, ethics and expressions of conviction, and commentaries on the Quran and the traditions of the saints. Without a doubt, the mysticism that established itself and expanded in Iran had historical roots in Iranian culture. But Quranic teachings and holy traditions and sayings were an appropriate source suited to this tendency. Thus, various kinds of mysticism were formed, which had similarities with pre-Islamic mystical traditions. These similarities and influences can be traced back to Zoroaster's teachings, Buddhist mysticism, which was prevalent in pre-Islam Khorasan, and Hinduist mysticism, which was influential in western Iran. However, with the emergence of Islam and the expansion of its doctrines, all pre-Islamic mystical legacies were transformed under the influence of Islamic principles and tenets and adapted to the Iranian reception of Islam.

In these contexts, mysticism showed a syncretistic tendency of overlapping and adaption among cultures. When Islam became the dominant principle and basis of all thoughts, values and behaviors, mysticism was imbued much further with Islamic doctrines. As Islamic philosophy increasingly approached Islamic theology over time and was put into the service of religious tenets and beliefs, mysticism was also colored by ethics and Islamic belief, for example Bāyazīd Baṣṭāmī and 'Aṭṭār's mysticism can be compared with Faiẓ-i Kāšānī (d. ca. 1680) and Šāh Ni'mat Allāh Walī's (d. 1430/31). Later Islamic mysticism was much more strongly oriented to explaining the narratives and saying of the great religious figures.

5. Context of Islamic mysticism

In view of its way of creation and orientation, mysticism is the most suited tradition in Islamic world to engage with ›the other‹ and to pursue mutual understanding and unification. This is not to be left as an abstraction. To learn more about such a potential, we need to consider the mystics' lifeworld and the great changes in Iranian history. To properly assess this potential, we should note the historical conditions of the establishment of mysticism and the experiences of the mystics in encountering ›the other‹ in order to reveal its veiled or semi-veiled capacity for the adoption of an intercultural perception and view.

Islamic mysticism, in comparison with Eastern mysticisms like Buddhism and Daoism, arose and flourished in a religious cultural realm. Islamic mysticism is a school that emerged alongside other ones. In view of these differences, Sufism should be placed alongside Buddhism and Daoism. Izutsu's comparison between Ibn 'Arabī and Lao Tzu is certainly an excellent piece of research. But it should be noted that this mysticism grown in the lap of a religion that is basically different from Buddhism and Daoism. For instance, Zen Buddhism, among the Japanese, is a cult that is Daoist in essence. The differences between Islam and Buddhism are fundamental. As Morimoto puts it, Buddhism is a cult substantially different from Islam.¹⁵

For example, there are explicit and decisive regulations for different affairs in Islam, whereas in Buddhism everything is undefined. This may have been the reason why Islamic mystics have always seen themselves obliged to paraphrase Quranic verses and religious statements. For example, a major part of Ibn 'Arabī's works is paraphrasing Quranic verses, narratives and religious statements. For this reason, paraphrasing is one of the pillars of Islamic Sufism. From the other side there is a tendency in Buddhism and almost all eastern religions to ambiguity. Islam sees the clear expression of all rules and definition of the duties in every field as its distinguishing character and advantage over other religions. For example, it has been mentioned in the Quran that there is nothing »[...] fresh or withered, but is recorded in a clear book«¹⁶.

Thus, it is characteristic of Islam that the jurists and learned officials have always had the most authority and have drawn the boundary between devoutness and blasphemy. So, the people who claimed anything beyond this defined limit was in danger of being charged with apostasy. The mystics and philosophers were more exposed to such a danger. Because of these conditions, the mystics gradually employed a cryptic language and multi-layered terms to express their perceptions and ideas.

¹⁵ See Morimoto 1383/2004, p. 27.

¹⁶ Q 6:59. All Quran verses translated into English by Qaribullah/Darwish 2001.

6. The fundamental experiences of mystics and their influence on the view of ›the other‹

The basis of Sufism lies in the appearance of a substantial evolution in human existence. With this evolution, which Sufis call ›repentance‹, the wayfarer transcends ordinary affairs and minor purposes. The consequence of the Sufi's conduct in the highest orders is encountering the unconditioned and the untold. The mystics, in their highest revelations, have referred to their intuitive perception as *ḥaqq* or »Truth«. In this level, the mystic experiences a unity with his intuitive perception. Referring to this level, Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāḡ has said that the most significant short expression in the history of mysticism is *Anā l-ḥaqq*, »I am the Truth«. Since the seventh Islamic century from the time that Ibn 'Arabī's followers began writing commentaries on *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, and mysticism was explained in philosophical terms, the similar statement »Real existence is *ḥaqq* or God« has been acknowledged.¹⁷

Such a concept existed in Christian mysticism as well, and in the twentieth century Heidegger's thoughts about Being revived this kind of interpretation. Here we can also acknowledge Carl Albert's interpretation that the ›experience of existence‹ is the foundation of all world mysticisms. In an essay, Albert explains that Eckhart used the potential of the word ›existence‹ which existed in the western philosophical tradition, to introduce his mysticism and even used it as a synonym for God.¹⁸

In the Islamic mysticism as well, at the highest form of the experience of existence, the seeker will be annihilated (*faniya/fanā'*). In this state of annihilation, the wayfarer will not lose his existence, but his existence becomes a Godly existence. In this situation his survival is dependent on the perpetuity of Allah. In this station the mystic feels he has no identity and that whatsoever he had, belong to God. This relation between the servant and God, which is sometimes called *walāya*, is the basis of all the mystic's states and deeds. This kind of relation with God has a fundamental influence on how the mystic treats others.

After the acquisition of God's grace, the seeker should thoroughly endeavor to maintain his relationship with God and reinforce it. One

¹⁷ See Qaiṣarī Rūmī 1375/1996, p. 13.

¹⁸ See Albert 1987, pp. 67-77.

of the prerequisites for maintaining this relation with God is having a proper understanding of people and treating them appropriately through that relation. According to Islamic teachings there are two categories of people: first, people of his religion and those who are in harmony with the seeker's beliefs and tenets, and secondly those who believe in other religions and principles. One's conduct towards the same believing people should be based on affection and adherence to the detailed statements of beliefs. Concerning those who believe otherwise, there are different statements in various jurisprudential schools. Most instructions agree on the necessity of avoiding them or inviting them to Islam. We can discern the mystics' perspectives on others (other peoples and their cultures) by using their few narratives pertaining to this and by referring to their principles.

Muḥyī ad-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī (d.1165) is the most important Muslim scholar and mystic whose principles of mysticism, and his book *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* has been the main reference for mystics. *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* was first explicated by an Iranian scholar, Ṣadr ad-Dīn Qūnawī (d.1274), and from there it gradually grew into a large school. This school has always flourished in Iran and dozens of expositions have been written on it.¹⁹

It should also be noted that Ibn ʿArabī during his life, experienced a variety of cultures and religions, more than other great mystics. Born in Andalusia, he grew up in the western part of the Islamic world. During his lifetime he traveled to a lot of regions and visited and had dialogues with the greatest scholars of his time from different religions and sects. He himself has given an account of these visits in the great book of *al-Futūḥāt al-makkīya*, »The Meccan Illuminations«. One of his visits was in Greece with a group who apparently worshipped the sun, and Ibn ʿArabī had a dialogue with them.²⁰

According to Ibn ʿArabī, man is generally the representative and the symbol of God. Creatures and particularly human beings are the symbols and the names of God. Every man is placed under one of the names of God. A man without a relation with God's names does not exist in the world, that is, man has an attribution to God forever. For Ibn ʿArabī every individual man belongs to a group of people, i.e. the individual has been identified based on the tradition with which he is affiliated and

¹⁹ See Ğahāngīrī 1361/1982, p. 423.

²⁰ See Ibn ʿArabī n. d., p. 426.

to which certain characteristics is attributed. Sufis divide people and traditions since their religions. These traditions lead back to original prophets. This means that the great historical traditions have begun by prophets. In his primary work, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, Ibn ‘Arabī discussed these traditions, or in other words, these cultures. But the scope of his discussions is limited to just Abrahamic prophets and does not address religions such as Hinduism or Buddhism. Ibn ‘Arabī calls the prophets »the words of God« and only names prophets who are God’s messengers according to Muslims’ religious texts. Some of his commentators have seen the issue more broadly and have considered the ›word‹ in a broader sense. As ‘Abd ar-Razzāq al-Kāšānī (d. 1330), the well-known commentator of *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, puts it, no people or nation is away from God’s circle of guidance.²¹ With this general notion of the ›word‹, including all founders in whom a wisdom out of God’s wisdoms has been manifested, all the emergent traditions throughout the history should be acknowledged as the symbols of God. Of course, Ibn ‘Arabī, in some of his interpretations, has proclaimed his inability or the impossibility to express all the words and wise aphorisms.²²

If we recognize people according to their traditions and cultures and if we consider every culture at the beginning of its appearance to be based on a wisdom by which God wanted to emanate one of His names, then no culture is without wisdom and the wayfarer, looking at the other people and cultures, should first of all consider the wisdom that is the foundation of that culture and should see the people, the followers of those cultures, as representatives of one of God’s wisdoms. This conception of the multiplicity of nations and the attention to ›the other‹ can have a concrete influence on peoples’ lives and their relations. ›The other‹ is acknowledged because of a deep perception of the human, and this acknowledgement and respect to his limits and beliefs is the prerequisite for maintaining the relation with God. So, the Sufi not only keeps himself open to others but also, overtly, seeks for a wisdom that emanates from others. Thus, while sustaining his belongings, the individual also tries to understand others and their specialities. He sees the others and their assets as bestowed from the same origin that he himself depends on. Everyone who does everything returns to the same source. Mystics believe that the manifestations of God are numerous; the observer should

²¹ See al-Kāšānī 1370/1991, p. 7.

²² See Ibn ‘Arabī 1980, p. 56.

have one thousand eyes to see them.²³ So, while staying within his cultural realm, the mystic is eager to roam in other cultures as well and perceive God's other manifestations.

7. One's relation to ›the other‹

Ibn ʿArabī, in a chapter called »Faṣṣu l-ḥikmatin aḥādīyatin fī kalimatīn hūdīya« in the book *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, offers a profound thought about the diversity of beliefs and the multiplicity of forms of God's servitude. After the exposition of the orders of God's emanation and the orders of knowledge about Him, he composed two verses:

فلا تنظر العين إلا إليه و لا يقع الحكم إلا عليه
فنحن له و به في يديه في كل حال فانا لديه

Eyes don't see anything except Him,
and all the judgments are about Him.
We belong Him, from him and in His hands,
in all cases, we are close to Him.²⁴

So, in any case we are either trying to know Him or describe Him or attempting to deny Him or transcend Him. A mystic is someone who saw God with godly eyes, while he was from Him and he was in Him, otherwise he is non-mystic or ignorant. From the other hand, if the words of Ibn ʿArabī are correct, then everyone has a belief about his God and returns to his God with the same belief. Since everybody knows his God with his own concept, if God appeared to him in another form, he would deny Him and rejects that concept, and in doing so, he will think he has behaved with proper decorum, whereas his behavior is away from curtesy.²⁵ In human world, everyone worships a God that he has made for himself, every believer has his own God. So, everyone sees his soul and what his soul has made.²⁶

In the resurrection, all the people will gather together and see God. According to Ibn ʿArabī, everybody's position in the resurrection will be based on the knowledge he has of his God. Everybody sees God based on his knowledge of his God. So, in the resurrection, the amount of

²³ See Furūḡī Bisṭāmī (d. 1857) who said: »You showed yourself off with thousands of lusters so that I could watch you with thousands of eyes« (Furūḡī Bisṭāmī 1348/1969).

²⁴ Ibn ʿArabī 1980, p. 113.

²⁵ See Ibn ʿArabī 1980, p. 113.

²⁶ Some mystics attributed a saying to Imam al-Bāqir (d. 732): »Maybe the ant imagines his God with two antennas«.

everyone's knowledge about God will be based on the identity and limits he now possesses and on the knowledge, which has been acquired upon that identity. Ibn 'Arabī concludes that the mystic should not confine himself to a particular belief and should not deny other beliefs. Then Ibn 'Arabī refers to a verse from Quran: »To Allah belong the east and the west. Whichever way you turn, there is the Face of Allah. He is the Embracer, the Knower«. ²⁷ In this verse is not mentioned that God is in a place and is not in another place. His countenance is everywhere. The countenance (*wağh*) of everything is the reality of that thing where it confronts through it to others. Preoccupation with limited affairs of this world should not lead to the negligence of seeing reality exclusively in one thing and denying the other things. Human being should not neglect this point, especially while encountering death. ²⁸

8. Maintaining self-identity and approving the other

One of the principles that has been very important from the outset is ›decorum‹ or more precisely ›decorum before God‹. Ibn 'Arabī offers an example of ›decorum before God‹ in relation to the beliefs of the other. Man should take care of his etiquette and appearance. So, the mystic should face *qibla* (the direction of prayer) while praying and note that God is in this direction and then says his prayers, but he should also note that this direction is just one of the directions to face God. He says his prayers facing *al-Masğid al-Ḥarām*, while acknowledging that this is merely one of the directions to encounter God. The mystic should behave with proper decorum and he shouldn't say that God is just in this direction. Here two kinds of decorum are needed: one of them is facing *al-Masğid al-Ḥarām* and the other not confining God's direction just to this place. While facing *al-Masğid al-Ḥarām*, the mystic should concede that this is only one of the directions to face God. ²⁹ To summarize, God is everywhere, and everything is face of God and is set in His direction. So, everybody enjoys the reward of his practice and in a sense, God is satisfied with everyone, although some people may suffer a time of hardship in the hereafter.

²⁷ Q 2:115.

²⁸ See Ibn 'Arabī 1980, p. 113.

²⁹ See Ibn 'Arabī 1980, p. 114:

لا تقل هو هنا فقط، بل قف عندما ادركت، و الزم الادب في الاستقبال شَطْر المسجد الحرام، و الزم الادب في عدم حصر الوجوه في تلك الخاصه، بل هي من جمله ابنيات ما تولى متول اليها

ناظر روی تو صاحب نظرانند آری سِرِّ گیسوی تو در هیچ سَری نیست که نیست

Your true face beholders are the people of insight,
however the secret of your tress is in every head.³⁰

As there is the secret of her tress in every head, so everyone has a relation with her (indirect hint of God), and in a way is enjoying the secrets. So, the encounter with everybody is an encounter with the bearer of secrets.

Another significant station for mystics is the station of ›consent‹. The basis of the station of consent is that everything that in the cosmos exists is from God; God is the creator and cultivator of every creature. The human is nothing in contrast with the will and volition of God. So, one should consent to everything that exists and everything that has been bestowed. The *other* human beings are among the most important creatures cultivated by God. Mystics have not expressed the issue this way, but this is an inevitable question for every mystic about ›the other‹. Looking at the others, one thinks about himself, his identity and his characteristics more. Having perceived the multiplicity in the world and the identities and characteristics of ourselves and others, what should be our position toward them? There are different options. One stance is denying the others and considering ourselves and our possessions to be right and proper; the other stance is denying ourselves too. But the third way is to be satisfied with our identities and maintain our relations while at the same time accepting and acknowledging others. Each *other* is the result of the will and cultivation of God.³¹ I cannot deny His existence and identity. This interpretation from ›the other‹ can be inferred from the words of the mystics. Some of the mystics like Abū Saʿīd-i Abū l-Ḥair avoided judgment about others. Since the universe has an owner, and we ourselves have also been placed in this universe, how can we judge God who is our and their God?

9. Another symbolic anecdote by Maulānā Rūmī

Rūmī, in a symbolic anecdote in the book of *Matnawī*, expresses the multiplicity of the forms of relations with God somewhat differently. The essence of the anecdote is related to Moses' encounter with a shepherd who praises God in anomalous words and phrases. The shepherd, based on his understanding and perception, praises God in a simple and plain way.

³⁰ Ḥāfiẓ, ġazal no. 73.

³¹ See Q 20:50:

قال ربنا الذى اعطى كل شىء خلقه ثم هدى

تو کجایی تا شوم من چاکرت چارقت دوزم کنم شانه سرت
دستکت بوسم بمالم پایکت وقت خواب آید بروم جایکت

Where are you for me to become your servant,
to sew your gown and comb your tress.
For me to kiss your hand, to caress your feet,
and at bed time sweep your sleeping couch.³²

In view of the life experience of a shepherd, this way of talking is a sincere prayer. But based on his own perception, Moses, who is entangled with obligations, hearing this way of praying and this different mode of contact with God, admonishes the shepherd. Meanwhile, a revelation from God addresses him and blames him:

وحی آمد سوی موسی از خدا بنده ما را چرا کردی جدا
تو برای وصل کردن آمدی نی برای فصل کردن آمدی

A revelation from God admonished Moses:
Why did you separate our servant from us?
You came to join people with God,
rather than sending them away.³³

From the mystics' view, the main principle is union not separation. Prophets have also come to generate union. God reminds Moses of this principle. Rūmī goes on to speak about the »religion of love«:

ملت عشق از همه دین‌ها جداست عاشقان را ملت و مذهب خداست

The religion of love is different from all religions,
God is the lovers' religion and denomination.³⁴

Ibn 'Arabī also in one of his works calls his religion the »religion of love«. He wrote in a poem:

لقد صار قلبی قابلاً کُلِّ صوره فمرعی لِغزلانٍ و دیرِ لِرهبان
و بیئتِ لاوِثانٍ و کعبه طائفِ و ألواحِ توراتٍ و م قرآن
أدینُ بدینِ الحبِّ أنی توَجَّهت رکائبه، فالحبُّ دینی و ایمانی

My heart has found the capacity of any form,
it has become the pasture of deer and the monastery of the monks.

32 Rūmī 1360/1981, vol. 2, verse 1721/23. The English translation of all verses of Rūmī is from the author.

33 Rūmī 1360/1981, vol. 2, verse 1750-51.

34 Rūmī 1360/1981, vol. 2, verse 1770.

Idol temple and the Ka'ba in Ṭā'if,
 the tablets of Torah and the book of Quran. Follower of the cult of
 Love, I'll go everywhere –
 the corps of love departs, Love is my religion and faith.³⁵

Ibn 'Arabī and Maulānā Rūmī, two great representatives of the tradition of mysticism, refer to a single principle. Both introduce their religions as the »religion of love«. In this religion, the heart has extended to be so vast that it can have room for different God-emanated forms in the world.

10. The horizon of conciliation between Moses and Pharaoh

The mystics emphasize ›contrast‹ as the law of creation. Šams-i Tabrīzī (d. 1248), in a simple anecdote, said:

They say that two friends were together for a long time. One day they came to serve a sheikh. The sheikh said: »How many years have you two been companions?« They said: »So many years.« He said: »Have you ever had a quarrel during this period?« They said: »No, only agreement.« He said: »Then you have been living in hypocrisy. You must have seen some act that stirred up trouble and dislike in your heart – there's no escape from it.« They said: »Yes.« He said: »Fear prevented you from mentioning that dislike.« They said: »Yes.«³⁶

Narrating this dialogue, Šams draws our attention to the distinction and difference as something necessary between humans.³⁷ There cannot be a ›self‹ which does not differ from the ›other‹ as difference and plurality is a prerequisite to the human world. Because plurality is prerequisite to human world, contrast and conflict are also necessary. Contrast and conflict are the first principle of human life. But besides emphasizing difference, mystics call on us to perceive another horizon of humanity. Every human being has entered disputes because of his affinities. In this poem, Maulānā Rūmī goes beyond the individual human horizon and says:

متحد بودیم و یک گوهر همه بی سر و بی پا بدیم آن سر همه
 یک گهر بودیم همچون آفتاب بی گره بودیم و صافی همچو آب

³⁵ Ibn 'Arabī 1378/1999, p. 57.

³⁶ Chittick 1395/2016, pp. 153-154.

³⁷ Accordingly, the famous mystical slogan *lā takrār fī t-tağallī*, i.e. »there is no repetition in epiphany« can be understood. When there is no repetition in epiphany, how could be two people without distinction?

چون به صورت آمد آن نور سره شد گره چون سایه‌های کنگره
کنگره ویران کنید چون منجیق تا رود فرق از میان این فریق
چون به بی‌رنگی رسی کان داشتی موسی و فرعون کردند آشتی

Unified were we and all one substance;
we were all without head and without foot yonder.
We were one substance, like the Sun;
we were knotless and pure, like water.
When that goodly Light took form,
it became (many in) number like the shadows of a battlement.
Raise ye the battlement with the *manḡanīq* (mangonel),
that difference may vanish from amidst this company (of shadows).
When Ye reached colorless as it were,
Moses and Pharaoh were in peace.³⁸

In this horizon, conflict and quarrel originate from veils and ignorance:

جنگ خلقان همچو جنگ کودکان جمله بی‌معنی و بی‌مغز و مهان

The wars of mankind are like children's fights –
all meaningless, pithless, and contemptible.³⁹

Rūmī is a person among the others, but he can go beyond himself and look at himself and human being from a superior horizon. He observes the single essence of humanity and how it is multiplied. He sees that the prerequisite of the birth of humans in nature is multiplicity. This multiplicity is not possible without descending into identities and intertwining with ›others‹ and becoming concrete. But all of this is the source of conflict. So, conflict will be an ever-emerging phenomenon as long as the world and its prerequisite i.e. multiplicity, remains. Based on Rūmī's thought, we can say that whenever the soul ascends, it approaches a unity in which plurality fades away.

گر حجاب از جانها برخاستی گفت هر جانی مسیح آراستی

If the (bodily) veil were removed from the spirits,
the speech of every spirit would be like the Messiah.⁴⁰

Even if you are a prophet like Moses, you must quarrel with the Pharaoh. As long as Moses is Moses, and the universe abides, there will be a Pharaoh and there will also be a quarrel. According to mystics like Ibn 'Arabī, what is unique in the *ummah* (Islamic supra-national community)

³⁸ Rūmī 1360/1981, vol. 1, verse 686-89 a. 2468.

³⁹ Rūmī 1360/1981, vol. 1, verse 3435.

⁴⁰ Rūmī 1360/1981, vol. 1, verse 1599.

of Muḥammad is the concept of »simultaneous plurality and unity« – that is, the conjunction of the »horizon of Moses« with the »horizon of conciliation of Moses and Pharaoh«. Awareness of the wisdom ruling the universe while living in the world and influencing people is something that wise men have always heeded. This horizon can serve as the basis for introducing the position of »being-in-between«, according to, human beings have the potential to transcend identities. Šams-i Tabrīzī in his epistles says:

Dervish headed down and said: people are plunged down into a variety of colors – save one who is pure of affinities, softly and gently takes his way home. Except him, the world is terribly colorful – one is Jewish, one is Christian, and one is Zoroastrian.⁴¹

Talawwun (variation of colors) in these expressions can mean the same plurality. Everyone has a color in this world. However, these colors can be erased.

11. Affection is the base of the relation of humanity

The basis of Islamic mysticism is ›kindness‹ and ›affection‹. God created humanity to establish an affectionate relation of love with Him. Love and kindness provide all creatures the mercy of being. Because of love and affection, all creatures have found the dignity for existence. The basis of the existence of human being and the most significant meaning in his being is love and affection. Even knowledge and worship (to other reasons mentioned in Quran for creation) are only the prelude to the emergence of love. Rūmī versified:

از محبت دردها صافی شود از محبت دردها شافی شود
از محبت مرده زنده می‌شود از محبت شاه بنده می‌شود
این محبت هم نتیجه دانش است کی گزافه بر چنین تختی نشست

Through love dregs become the pure wine,
through love pains are as healing balms.
From love, dead becomes alive,
from love, king becomes servant.
This love is but the offspring of knowledge,
no vain claimant would take seat on such a Throne.⁴²

⁴¹ Šams-i Tabrīzī 1391/2012, p. 126.

⁴² Rūmī 1360/1981, vol. 2, verse 1530-33.

12. Various tendencies in Islamic mysticism

Although there is a prevailing tendency towards ›receiving others‹ and ›tolerance‹ in Islamic mysticism and Sufism, this orientation should not be considered a necessary consequence of Islamic mysticism. There are also contrasting tendencies in mysticism. Sufism can also take the form of ›opposing others‹. Here I will mention two examples. Firstly, ‘Alā’ d-Daula Simnānī (d. 1336) in his autobiography describes a dialogue with King Arghun:

I said: »Do you give this gardener some bucks every year?« He replied: »Yeah.« I asked: »Why does he cut the green branches and drop them down?« He said: »He’s a gardener, he knows what to do. He clips what should be cut off, so that the other branches would be reinforced, and the water that the bad branches take in would be saved for the good ones to grow.« I said: »This world is the garden of God, and Muḥammad the gardener, people are like trees. Muḥammad knows that the infidels are the bad branches while Muslims are the good ones. He cuts off the bad branches, that is, he kills the infidels so that the Muslims could serve God in peace of mind. Hence, the Muslims could take God’s blessing and obey God instead of unbelievers who would benefit from God’s mercy and commit sins.«⁴³

Šaiḥ Aḥmad-i Ğām (d. 1141) was very explicit about his views, and this openness sometimes appeared as a coarse behavior to others. He emphasized: »You must say just what you have in your heart.«⁴⁴ In the book *Maqāmāt-i Žanda Pīl* (The Epistles of Aḥmad-i Ğām), it is written repeatedly that he blamed his followers for saying something which was not in their hearts or even against their hearts. From Aḥmad-i Ğām’s perspective, there is always a right and wrong war. We must always stand on the right side and say the truth, regardless of what *others* say. Everyone who composes a book or writes something out must necessarily do it sincerely, knowing that certain people will understand it and others will reject it. This is the case in all affairs. Right and wrong of any kind will be accepted by some groups and rejected by other groups; so, in our mind we should free ourselves from what people might say. You must say what is ›right‹ as much as you know how to achieve salvation.⁴⁵

43 Simnānī 1383/2004, p. 18.

44 Ğaznawī 1387/2008, p. 234.

45 See Ğaznawī 1387/2008, p. 1.

Considering the history of philosophical thought, especially of our contemporary time, we can divide these thinkers into two groups; followers of separation (*ahl al-faṣl*) and followers of union (*ahl al-waṣl*). A thinker such as Maulānā is a follower of union and a thinker like Aḥmad-i Ğām is a follower of separation. He believes in a decisive separation between right and wrong. This separation, distinction and contrast is the act of God, and nobody can protest:

So, in this world, the interior and exterior and our whole being is based on caprice, excess and melancholia, nobody dares to say why this is so, or why did you do that? One is good and one ugly, one is wise and one is maniac.«⁴⁶

In his view, to be right is a very difficult task and requires the power to confront wrong:

To say the right is difficult, and greater than that is listening to the right. People do not like advice, for it is bitter, and they prefer gossip and lie to wisdom. We advised our brothers with what we knew as right and got released of the burden on our shoulders; although we know that this would bear insult and ugliness in this world, and way of right is bitter.⁴⁷

Aḥmad-i Ğām, contrary to others, sees the right as bitter and considers it as a cause of bitterness and disagreement to ›others‹, as the right is the narrow path that most of the people avoid. He introduces three evil groups among Muslims whom much of the people follow. Then he describes their enmity and hostility towards him: »I know that most of the people have obedience to these three groups, and they will all insult me and consider me as their enemy [...]. I say the right and I'm not afraid of folks.«⁴⁸

It seems that Aḥmad-i Ğām sees not being afraid of people and not counting on them and totally disregarding their views and behavior as a sign that one is on the right path. We can compare these views and attitudes with Rūmī's views on people and his convergent orientation of union and sympathy. Aḥmad-i Ğām sees an irremovable difference and contrast between people and advocates maintaining this confrontation and engagement with the ›other‹. He exemplifies the story of Moses and Khidr to support his idea: »You do not know the way! It appears curved

46 Ğaznawī 1387/2008, p. 36.

47 Ğaznawī 1387/2008, p. 38.

48 Ğaznawī 1387/2008, p. 48.

to you! However, this is the right way; don't you see whatsoever Khidr did, seemed wrong to Moses!? – But the right way was what Khidr did!«⁴⁹

As was said above, the dominant trend in the thinking and behavior of the Islamic mystics was tolerance, »tendency towards others«, affection and kindness. But this orientation is not an essential part of this tradition. This point, on the one hand, shows the existence of different tendencies in Islamic and Iranian traditions and, on the other hand, indicates the role of the experiences and bio-world of the followers of traditions in influencing the traditions in their lives. 

49 Ġaznawī 1387/2008, p. 52.

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Abb. 9: Guido Reni (1575-1642): Joseph und Potiphars Frau. Öl auf Leinwand. 128 × 170 cm. 1630. Getty Center, Los Angeles.