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Mystical Experience in Persian Sufism

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Abstract

Sufism was a human reaction to an extensive variety of settings and circumstances; the fact that Sufis lived in society and interacted with the community necessitating guidance on how to behave. In this essay we will analyze the improvement of Persian Sufism, demonstrating it to be a philosophy of the everyday rather than just a metaphysical phenomenon and will show that the ethics of Sufism were the Islamic codes of honor which underlined dedication, modesty, liberality and dauntlessness. Albeit definitely a few Sufis spiritualized this code of honor and connected it to their own particular association with God, the ethic kept on saturating Sufi conduct on a more ordinary level, embodied by the solid connections amongst Sufis and certain exchanges.

Keywords: Mysticism, Sufism, metaphysical experience, Sufi orders

Introduction:

The term mysticism has ancient Greek origins with various historically determined meanings. Derived from the Greek, meaning to conceal, mysticism referred to the biblical liturgical, spiritual, and contemplative dimensions of early and medieval Christianity. During the early modern period, the definition of mysticism grew to include a broad range of beliefs and ideologies related to extraordinary experiences and states of mind.

Mysticism in the literal sense means living as closely united to God as possible. Understood in this way, mystical life is open to all; it is a matter of letting God, in love, live in us.

Mysticism in Persian culture named by Sufism. It is certainly emphasizes this union with God. But is this always so in conditions worthy of God and of man? It is here that the necessity arises of seeing the radical

difference between mysticism and Sufism . For Sufism effectually turns its back on Mysticism. While mysticism is an opening up to God, to his revelation and his love, Sufism claims to provide the power to acquire God, indeed to become God through one's own efforts by reaching degrees of knowledge reserved for the initiated who keep these powers to themselves (Bruinessen, 2007:17) .

Sufism is a willed spiritual power achieved through secrets or techniques. Far from liberating man, these secrets and techniques create an artificial spiritualism within which the man with knowledge locks himself up. The illusion of knowing prevents one from hearing God who reveals himself by speaking to those who are sufficiently humble to want to know him as he himself tells us he is and so some people enclose themselves in a theory of numerology; others in the various boxes of determinist character logy; yet others in horoscope columns; others in meditation techniques .

Mysticism is a constellation of distinctive practices, discourses, texts, institutions, traditions, and experiences aimed at human transformation, variously defined in different traditions.

In modern times, mysticism has acquired a limited definition, with broad applications, as meaning the aim at the union with the Absolute, the Infinite, or God. This limited definition has been applied to a wide range of religious traditions and practices, valuing mystical experience as a key element of mysticism.

Since the 1960s scholars have debated the merits of perennial and constructionist approaches in the scientific research of mystical experiences; the perennial position is now largely dismissed by scholars.

what might at times seem to be a straightforward phenomenon exhibiting an unambiguous commonality has become, at least within the academic study of religion, opaque and controversial on multiple levels. The definition, or meaning, of the term mysticism has changed through the ages (Green, 2012:45).

Theoretical basis of research:

Spiritual life and re-formation

Mysticism is the science or art of the spiritual life. It is the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order; whatever be the theological formula under which that order is understood.

Episodic experience and mysticism as a process that, though surely punctuated by moments of visionary, and transformative encounters, is ultimately inseparable from its embodied relation to a total religious matrix: liturgy, scripture, worship, virtues, theology, rituals, practice and the arts.

Typically, mystics, theistic or not, see their mystical experience as part of a larger undertaking aimed at human transformation and not as the terminus of their efforts. Thus, in general, 'mysticism' would best be thought of as a constellation of distinctive practices, discourses, texts, institutions, traditions, and experiences aimed at human transformation, variously defined in different traditions.

As presence is more accurate than union, since not all mystics spoke of union with God, and since many visions and miracles were not necessarily related to union. He also argues that we should speak of consciousness of God's presence, rather than of experience, since mystical activity is not simply about the sensation of God as an external object, but more broadly about

New ways of knowing and loving based on states of awareness in which God becomes present in our inner acts.

Love must be regarded as a central element in Sufism, because Sufism is the perception of the universe and all of its seemingly disparate entities existing in a unified whole bound together by love and a way of life and a direct consciousness of the presence of God' or 'the ground of being' or similar expressions..

Related to the idea of presence instead of experience is the transformation that occurs through mystical activity.

Enlightenment

Some authors emphasize that mystical experience involves intuitive understanding and the resolution of life problems.

A mystical experience is an intuitive understanding and realization of the meaning of existence – an intuitive understanding and realization which is intense, integrating, self-authenticating, liberating – i.e., providing a sense of release from ordinary self-awareness – and subsequently determinative – i.e., a primary criterion – for interpreting all other experience whether cognitive, conative, or affective.

Mystical illumination is interpreted as a central visionary experience in a psychological and behavioral process that results in the resolution of a personal or religious problem. This factual, minimal interpretation depicts mysticism as an extreme and intense form of the insight seeking process that goes in activities such as solving theoretical problems or developing new inventions (Underhill, 1961:209).

Research Background

Mystical experience and union with the Divine

William James, who popularized the use of the term religious experience in his The Varieties of Religious Experience, influenced the understanding of mysticism as a distinctive experience which supplies knowledge of the transcendental. He considered the personal religion to be more fundamental than either theology or ecclesiasticism, and states:

In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition, hardly altered by differences of clime or creed. In Hinduism, in Neoplatonism, in Sufism, in Christian mysticism, in Whitmanism, we find the same recurring note, so that there is about mystical utterances an eternal unanimity which ought to make a critic stop and think, and which bring it about that the mystical classics have, as been said, neither birthday not native land.

mysticism is the doctrine that special mental states or events allow an understanding of ultimate truths. Although it is difficult to differentiate which forms of experience allow such understandings, mental episodes supporting belief in other kinds of reality are often labeled mystical ... Mysticism tends to refer to experiences supporting belief in a cosmic unity rather than the advocation of a particular religious ideology (Strunk, 1959:87).

Mysticism is frequently defined as an experience of direct communion with God, or union with the Absolute, but definitions of mysticism (a relatively modern term) are often imprecise and usually rely on the presuppositions of the modern study of mysticism namely, that mystical experiences involve a set of

intense and usually individual and private psychological states. Furthermore, mysticism is a phenomenon said to be found in all major religious traditions.

In the Hellenistic world, 'mystical' referred to secret religious rituals the use of the word lacked any direct references to the transcendental. A mystikos was an initiate of a mystery religion.

The Origins of Sufism

There is disagreement among religious scholars and Sufis themselves about the origins of Sufism. The traditional view is that Sufism is the mystical school of Islam and had its beginnings in the first centuries following the life of the Prophet Mohammad. Indeed, most Sufis in the world today are Muslim and many of them would consider a non-Islamic Sufism impossible.

There is another view, however, that traces the pre-Islamic roots of Sufism back through the early Christian mystics of Syria and Egypt, to the Essenes, the ancient Pythagorean orders, and the mystery schools of the Egyptians and Zoroastrians, among others. It is these roots that gathered into the trunk known as Islamic Sufism(Lings, 1975:243).

In early Christianity the term mystikos referred to three dimensions, which soon became intertwined, namely the biblical, the liturgical and the spiritual or contemplative. The biblical dimension refers to hidden or allegorical interpretations of Scriptures. The liturgical dimension refers to the liturgical mystery of the Eucharist, the presence of Christ at the Eucharist. The third dimension is the contemplative or experiential knowledge of God.

The link between mysticism and the vision of the Divine was introduced by the early Church Fathers, who used the term as an adjective, as in mystical theology and mystical contemplation.

This threefold meaning of mystical continued in the Middle Ages. Under the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite the mystical theology came to denote the investigation of the allegorical truth of the Bible. Pseudo-Dionysius' Apophatic theology, or negative theology, exerted a great influence on medieval monastic religiosity, although it was mostly a male religiosity, since women were not allowed to study. It was influenced by Neo-Platonism, and very influential in Eastern Orthodox Christian theology. In western Christianity it was a counter-current to the prevailing Cataphatic theology or positive theology. It is best known nowadays in the western world from Meister Eckhart and John of the Cross.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth century mysticism came to be used as a substantive. This shift was linked to a new discourse. in which science and religion were separated.

Luther dismissed the allegorical interpretation of the bible, and condemned Mystical theology, which he saw as more Platonic than Christian. The mystical, as the search for the hidden meaning of texts, became secularised, and also associated with literature, as opposed to science and prose.

Science was also distinguished from religion. By the middle of the 17th century, the mystical is increasingly applied exclusively to the religious realm, separating religion and natural philosophy as two distinct approaches to the discovery of the hidden meaning of the universe. The traditional hagiographies and writings of the saints became designated as mystical, shifting from the virtues and miracles to extraordinary experiences and states of mind, thereby creating a newly coined mystical tradition. A new understanding developed of the Divine as residing within human, an essence beyond the varieties of religious expressions.

The competition between the perspectives of theology and science resulted in a compromise in which most varieties of what had traditionally been called mysticism were dismissed as merely psychological

phenomena and only one variety, which aimed at union with the Absolute, the Infinite, or God—and thereby the perception of its essential unity or oneness—was claimed to be genuinely mystical. The historical evidence, however, does not support such a narrow conception of mysticism (Hinnells, 2010:56). .

Under the influence of Perennialism, which was popularized in both the west and the east by Unitarianism, Transcendentalists and Theosophy, mysticism has acquired a broader meaning, in which all sorts of esotericism and religious traditions and practices are joined together.

The term mysticism has been extended to comparable phenomena in non-Christian religions, where it influenced Hindu and Buddhist responses to colonialism, resulting in Neo-Vedanta and Buddhist modernism.

In the contemporary usage mysticism has become an umbrella term for all sorts of non-rational world views. William Harmless even states that mysticism has become a catch-all for religious weirdness. Within the academic study of religion the apparent unambiguous commonality has become opaque and controversial. The term mysticism is being used in different ways in different traditions. Some call to attention the conflation of mysticism and linked terms, such as spirituality and esotericism, and point at the differences between various traditions.

Mystical experience

Since the 19th century, mystical experience has evolved as a distinctive concept. It is closely related to mysticism, but lays sole emphasis on the experiential aspect, be it spontaneous or induced by human behavior.

Two distinct approaches can be discerned in the study of mystical experience. Perennialists regard those various traditions as pointing to one universal transcendental reality, for which those experiences offer.

The perennial position is largely dismissed by scholars, but has lost none of its popularity. Instead, a constructionist approach is favored, which states that mystical experiences are mediated by pre-existing frames of reference. Critics of the term religious experience note that the notion of religious experience or mystical experience as marking insight into religious truth is a modern development, and contemporary researchers of mysticism note that mystical experiences are shaped by the concepts which the mystic brings to, and which shape, his experience. What is being experienced is being determined by the expectations and the conceptual background of the mystic (Aumann, 1980:69).

Based on various definitions of mysticism, namely mysticism as a way of transformation, mysticism as enlightenment or insight, and mysticism as an experience of union, mysticism can be found in all major world religions.

Western mysticism

The Eleusinian mysteries were annual initiation ceremonies in the cults of the goddesses Demeter and Persephone, held in secret at Eleusis (near Athens) in ancient Greece. The mysteries began in about 1600 B.C. in the Mycenean period and continued for two thousand years, becoming a major festival during the Hellenic era, and later spreading to Rome (Bowman, 1978:278).

Christian mysticism

The Apophatic theology, or negative theology, of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite exerted a great influence on medieval monastic religiosity.

The High Middle Ages saw a flourishing of mystical practice and theorization corresponding to the flourishing of new monastic orders, with such figures as Guigo II, Hildegard of Bingen, Bernard of Clairvaux, the Victorines, all coming from different orders, as well as the first real flowering of popular piety among the laypeople.

The Late Middle Ages saw the clash between the Dominican and Franciscan schools of thought, which was also a conflict between two different mystical theologies: on the one hand that of Dominic de Guzmán and on the other that of Francis of Assisi, Anthony of Padua, Bonaventure, and Angela of Foligno. This period also saw such individuals as John of Ruysbroeck, Catherine of Siena and Catherine of Genoa, the Devotio Moderna, and such books as the Theologia Germanica, The Cloud of Unknowing and The Imitation of Christ.

Moreover, there was the growth of groups of mystics centered around geographic regions: the Beguines, such as Mechthild of Magdeburg and Hadewijch (among others); the Rhineland mystics Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler and Henry Suso; and the English mystics Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton and Julian of Norwich. The Spanish mystics included Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross and Ignatius Loyola.

The later post-reformation period also saw the writings of lay visionaries such as Emanuel Swedenborg and William Blake, and the foundation of mystical movements such as the Quakers. Catholic mysticism continued into the modern period with such figures as Padre Pio and Thomas Merton.

The philokalia, an ancient method of Eastern Orthodox mysticism, was promoted by the twentieth century Traditionalist School. The inspired or channeled work A Course in Miracles represents a blending of non-denominational Christian and New Age ideas(McNamara, 1981:301).

Islamic mysticism

Sufism is Islamic mysticism. As such, it has the special disitinction of being found in the sunnite as well as the shiite traditions of Islam. It is extremely difficult to attempt a description of Sufism. Like all forms of mysticism, it is above all the search for God and this search may be expressed in many different ways, taking various forms. On the other hand, by reason of its esoteric aspects; it introduces secret practices, initiation rites that vary depending on the masters who teach them.

There is no unity in Sufism. Each master gathers together a band of disciples drawn by the reputation of his teaching. At most, these masters admit to belonging to a confraternity , itself founded by a famous Sufi in bygone ages. As soon as reference is made to Islam, nobody checks any orthodoxy whatever in the teaching given.

The importance of this Sufism is nonetheless remarkable. In literature it had a profound influence on the inspiration of some of the most outstanding Arabo-Persian works like the Tales of a Thousand and One Nights and the love poem of Leyli and Majnoon.

However, the most original aspect of Sufism is its spirituality. In the Sufi view, God is approached by degrees. Firstly, the law of the Koran must be respected; but this is only a first step which does not lead to the understanding of the nature of the world. The rituals are of no use if one doesn't know their hidden meaning. It is only through an initiation that one is enabled to see behind the appearance of things. For example, Man is a microcosm, a world in miniature, in which the image of the universe is to be found, the

macrocosm. So it is quite natural that in deepening one's knowledge of man one should arrive at an understanding of the world which is already a step towards God (Knysh, 2000:15).

According to the Sufi saints, all existence comes from God and God alone is real. The created world is but a reflection of the Divine; the universe is the Shadow of the Absolute. The ability to discern God behind the screen of things implies purity of soul. It is only through an effort to withdraw from the world that one can approach God: Man is a mirror which, when polished, reflects God.

The God that the Sufis discover is a God of love and the way to him is through Love: whoever knows God, loves him; whoever knows the world turns away from him. If you wish to be free, become a prisoner of Love.

This is not unfamiliar music to the ears of the Christian mystics. In this respect, it is curious to note the similarities between Sufism and other philosophic or religious trends. Originally, Sufism was influenced by Pythagorean thought and by the Zoroastrian religion of Persia. The Sufi initiation rite , which opens up the possibility of a spiritual rebirth, is not entirely unlike Christian baptism and one could even identify some Buddhist echoes in the Sufi formula man is non-existent before God (James, 1995:87).

There is the same diversity and the same imagination in the spiritual techniques of Sufism. The search for God through symbolism, in the case of some Sufis, passes through music or dance which, they believe, transcends thought. This was practiced by Djalal ed din Roumi, according to Mevlana, the founder of the whirling dervishes. In the case of other Sufis, symbolism is an intellectual exercise in which one meditates on the numerical value of letters as the Cabbalistic Jews do. Sometimes also, it is through an endless repetition of the invocation of the names of God that the Sufi seeks union with Him (Katz, 2013:312).

And so Sufism brings to Islam a poetic and mystical dimension that one could never find in the exegetes' pernickety analysis of the texts of the Koran. For this reason the latter, irritated by this over-zealous fervor, seek to marginalize Sufism. This is also why the Sufis set such store by their practices and trace them back to the prophet himself. They hold that Mohammed received, at the same time as the Koran, esoteric revelations which he revealed only to some of his companions. In this way, the Sufi masters all link their teaching to a long line of predecessors who give them authenticity.

However, this legitimacy through reference to the prophet does not give rise to uniformity in the Sufi movement. There are many different schools and each one has its own style and practices. In French, these schools are generally designated under the name of confraternities. Before going on to study some of these schools, it is necessary first to keep in mind that the confraternities have become, not an institution, but at least one way of living Islam in a manner so widely accepted that all kinds of movements, mystical or not, assume the title of confraternity in order to practice their activities. One should not therefore be surprised at times to come across rather un mystical confraternities with a rudimentary spirituality that is far removed from the elevated speculations that have made Sufism one of the major components of universal spirituality.

Sufism is said to be Islam's inner and mystical dimension.Classical Sufi scholars have defined Sufism as a science whose objective is the reparation of the heart and turning it away from all else but God.

A practitioner of this tradition is nowadays known as a Sufi or, in earlier usage, a dervish. The origin of the word Sufi is ambiguous. One understanding is that Sufi means wool-wearer- wool wearers during early Islam were pious ascetics who withdrew from urban life. Another explanation of the word Sufi is that it means purity.

Sufis generally belong to a Halqa, a circle or group, led by a Sheikh or Murshid. Sufi circles usually belong to a Tariqa which is the Sufi order and each has a Silsila, which is the spiritual lineage, which traces its succession back to notable Sufis of the past, and often ultimately to the prophet Muhammed or one of his close associates. The turuq (plural of tariqa) are not enclosed like Christian monastic orders; rather the members retain an outside life. Membership of a Sufi group often passes down family lines. Meetings may or may not be segregated according to the prevailing custom of the wider society. An existing Muslim faith is not always a requirement for entry, particularly in Western countries.

Sufi practice includes:

1- Dhikr, or remembrance (of God), which often takes the form of rhythmic chanting and breathing exercises.

2- Sema, which takes the form of music and dance, the whirling dance of the Mevlevi dervishes is a form well known in the West.

Muraqaba or meditation.

Visiting holy places, particularly the tombs of Sufi saints, in order to remember death and the greatness of those who have passed.

The aims of Sufism include: the experience of ecstatic states (hal), purification of the heart (qalb), overcoming the lower self (nafs), extinction of the individual personality (fana), communion with God (haqiqa), and higher knowledge (marifat). Some sufic beliefs and practices have been found unorthodox by other Muslims; for instance Mansur al-Hallaj was put to death for blasphemy after uttering the phrase Ana'l Haqq, I am the Truth (i.e. God) in a trance.

Notable classical Sufis include Jalaluddin Rumi, Fariduddin Attar, Saadi Shirazi and Hafez, all major poets in the Persian language., Al-Ghazzali and Ibn Arabi, were renowned scholars. Abdul Qadir Jilani, Moinuddin Chishti, and Bahauddin Naqshband founded major orders, as did Rumi. Rabia Basri was the most prominent female Sufi.

Sufism, the major trend of Islamic mysticism, has become increasingly visible in Western contexts during the last two centuries. Sufi texts were translated from Islamic languages into European languages; Sufi orders and their branches expanded into Euro-American spaces, and significant religious and social movements have been inspired by Sufi principles. Such a vibrant presence of Sufism in the West has undoubtedly influenced European and American cultural and academic discourse. Yet, the interaction between Muslim majority and Western cultures through Sufism is not limited to such tangible impacts, nor is the cross-cultural exchange between the two contexts confined to the unilateral influence of one upon the other. This interrelation is also not limited to the realm of religion and spirituality. It is rather a multi-dimensional, reciprocal interchange, a dialogue between the West and the Muslim world, in which Sufism functions, among other elements, as a vehicle of distinction, self-definition and self-criticism as well as an instance of the repositioning of religion in the age of globalization (Ludden, 2011:88).

Conclusion:

The standards of Sufism are all based upon the principles and teachings of the Koran and the directions of the Prophet. To a Sufi there is no bay of partition between all of Being, the Creator, and His manifestations. That the large number can't see this essential solidarity is the aftereffect of the contamination of nafs and the restrictions of the material and physical devices that humanity has. On the

off chance that man was free from the restrictions of matter, and then he would unquestionably witness this tremendous and everlasting solidarity of Being. Be that as it may, there is a chance for humankind to rise to such a level of comprehension, a pathway that can be finished refinement and reflection to the acknowledgment of its accomplishment. When one's heart is refined, the signs of the Divine is reflected in the mirror of the heart. At exactly that point may man climb from the level of his creature nature to the level of the genuine person. Since every one of the rule that underlie the guidelines of Sufis depend on the Koran, it is difficult to relate Sufism to any religion outside of Islam. However the quest for genuine understanding and theoretical information of the truth is an all-inclusive journey. For whatever length of time that mankind persists, so too will the quest for such comprehension proceed. History demonstrates to us that each country and religion has its own particular manner of communicating the all-inclusive profound journey.

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