

MYSTICISM- A PARALLEL RELIGION?

Ahmreen Malik

Assistant Professor of Philosophy

Govt. Degree College for Women Kot Khawaja Saeed, Lahore, Pakistan.

Abstract. Mysticism, in its different forms, is as old as religion itself, but questions have always been raised about its connection with religion and whether it is based on religion. It is a common observation that the things involved in mysticism have no religious background, some even violating and negating religion. Mystics and Sufis with their direct access to God, and the miracles which, their followers claim, they perform seems to leave the personalities of prophets fading behind the popularity of these powerful 'Pirs'. In its purest form Sufism does not have any conflict with Islam, but it is not found easily. The form it has adopted, with time, however, has made it a popular religion in itself, suitable to some classes of an under developed society.

Key Words: Tassawuf, Sufism, Dhikr, Dervishes, Tariqa, Celibacy

God created man in his own image and man being His creation shares His attributes. Man was declared His vice-regent, His *khalifa*, who would carry out His will on earth. Man, infact, is the only creature who claims nearness to God. There are two aspects of man's life, an inner aspect and an outer aspect. The outer aspect includes his dealings with people and the religious rituals he performs, and all his outward actions which have bearing on people around him. The inner and the far more important aspect of his personality primarily comprise intentions, or '*niyat*'. Man's intentions make him what he really is. It is this inner dimension of our personality that Islam stresses. It is this aspect that holds the secrets of mysticism, a hidden connection with the Ultimate Reality; God the Eternal. Man had been blessed with the faculty to reason and given a wide world to explore, as in his nature was the reflection of the Creator. In turn, man was expected to submit to God with all of his physical and mental capacities. In this, we find the germinal idea of *Tassawuf*; a one to one relationship with God.

First, we have to see what exactly is meant by *Tassawuf*, or Mysticism in a wider sense. Mysticism is a positively dangerous but beautifully attractive trend, primarily based on love. It is found in almost all religions of the past and present, with different variations. Mysticism is a short cut of sentiment, to reach a truth, otherwise unattainable by intellect. It deals with neither comprehension nor intelligence. A mystic must enter into a perfect communion with God by surrendering his being and reaching a stage of utter forgetfulness of all things. A mystic is full of feelings of the Ultimate Reality. He feels he has grasped the truth which he cannot grasp himself. Mysticism is based on feelings instead of knowledge.¹ It is attractive because it has nothing to do with dos and don'ts of religion, and it does not necessarily have anything to do with God of the Bible or the Quran, nothing to do with religious laws or dogmas, or morality for that matter.

Faith and Mysticism

Mysticism has its origin in religion and religion is all about faith. The first step in religion is faith which is truly empirical. Faith is accompanied by actions which are necessary to prove its validity. Faith, it is said, is the only means where by the soul is united with God. But this is the claim also made by the Mystics. Faith has its objective basis in revelation. In Islam the will of God was revealed to the Holy Prophet P.B.U.H. Faith is a matter of will, not of temperament, while mysticism is. Faith is superior to mysticism; it is the root of personal religious experience. This makes it universal, the center of religion. Mysticism is subjective. Faith and religion have their center not in the individual temperament, but in the collective moral consciousness of human kind.² Mysticism if it has any reality must be held in subordination to faith and in certain examples of our classical Sufi poets this thing is quite evident and in them we see a complete harmony of faith and mystical experience. However, it is a common observation that much of the things involved in mysticism have no religious background, some even violating and negating religion, such as women dancing on shrines, so called mystics going into drug induced trance etc.

¹ See (Carus 1908)

²(Lyman 1904)

Religion and Mysticism

In trying to find connections between religion and mysticism we must see what we mean by religion and while we speak of religion we mean Islam by it. Religion is the primordial universal and all-embracing phenomenon of human existence. It is man's expression of the Divine. It is a check on the unbridled animality of man providing him rules and laying down limits for his conduct and reminding him of his pact with God. Religion has a clear cut role which leaves no doubt in its application on man. Can we say anything with such certainty about mysticism which claims a Divine connection itself? What explanation can we give for the ambiguity involved not only in the mystical experience itself but its communication as well? What quality or worth could be known of an ineffable experience, which could neither be expressed, imparted nor transferred to others? If mysticism is identical with religion then religion as an experience of the divine would include very few people as the majority does not have the required nervous endowment to have a mystical experience. If mystics could have a direct experience of God then what role can we assign to the prophets?

In the history of religions, the personalities of the prophets were a dominant force as they were channels for personal communion with God. Either directly or through the medium of Arch Angel Gabriel Prophet Mohammad P.B.U.H, received the Quranic revelations from God. These revelations carried instructions, advices and admonitions for the Believers. The Believers did not have to go through a mystical experience to understand them. It was the Prophet P.B.U.H whose duty it was to impart these instructions to the people. So in religion people have faith in another man's faith. Instead of trying to find God solely in isolated Phenomenon (trance, ecstasy), we see majority of religious people finding the attributes of God in the personalities and characters of the Prophets.³ We have the Quran and the personality of the Holy Prophet P.B.U.H as an example and a source of guidance for us. Do we need to follow yet another path? We do need to develop an understanding, an insight into the religious injunctions and commands, we may call this *hikmat*, the logic and sense behind things. It definitely does not point to the need to develop an elaborate system to understand God. The main purpose is complete and unconditional obedience followed by actions in accordance with this subservience.

³(Lyman 1904)

History of Muslim Mysticism

During the early and medieval times of Islam, Mysticism attracted many great minds. Mystical trends as abstinence from worldly pleasures first appeared in Muslim history at the times of Umayyad Caliphate, a time of great political unrest. The end of Umayyad rule and later the Abbasid era saw bitter political struggle and ruthless blood shedding for power. There was a general feeling of resentment and bitterness among the people. Numerous theological controversies sprang up as well but all of these had political background, for example, Kharijites, Shiites, Qadarites, then Mutazlites and Asharites. These growing conflicts of fanatical sectarianism, political chaos, and a decreasing religious fervor left many devout Muslims withdrawing from worldly affairs and taking refuge in praying. This trend gradually gained more and more popularity, developing into a permanent discipline, slowly taking on the form of a parallel religion with Islam. These ascetics, or mystics, came to be known as Sufis. Several Sufi orders or groups came into being, developing distinct rituals and practices. So with purely Islamic origin Muslim mysticism, with time lost itself into a conglomeration of local culture and the effects of Christian, Neo-platonic and Buddhist religions. So Ali Hajwery quotes in his *Kashaf-ul-Mahjoob(Unveiling the Veiled)*, that formerly Sufism was a reality without a name and in his time it had become a name without reality and this is, in fact, not far from truth.⁴

A mystic's knowledge is a sort of experiential knowledge, detached from traditional theology of mosques and madrassas. It is a sort of consciousness received or acquired in which the mystic loses himself in God. So a Sufi is the one who basically diverges from the normal path, away from religious references. It is the Divine touch that the Sufi claims, turning their life upside down. For common people Mysticism is nothing more than shrines, dead saints, *dhikr* circles, colorful flags and banners, and scores of Sufi orders. For a person not familiar with tassawuf, the movements and actions of the Sufis would be confused mumblings, and hysterical actions, things; somehow, one cannot associate with Islam, especially when one has in mind the personalities of the Holy Prophet P.B.U.H and his Companions and the details of their lives and deeds. If Islamic mysticism or *Tassawuf* is all about total submission to the will of God and about the love of God, repentance and avoidance of sin, gratitude, and the realization that this worldly life is

⁴(Alhaq 1996)

temporary so must not be given priority over our relationship with God, then why is a Sufi called a Sufi and not a *Momin*, and why they go to such great lengths to make themselves look different from other Muslims, by adopting strange practices and dressing up in particular ways? It is a fact that the word '*Sufi*' was coined in the later times but it is exactly in those times that mysticism changed its course and adopted many of the practices contrary to the spirit of Islam. If mystical traditions have their germinal ideas in the Quran, these trends are also already present, with very strong foundations, in Christianity and Buddhism. It is natural for people hailing from different religions and cultural traditions, entering Islam, to bring along the traces of their former beliefs and social practices. The variations in Mysticism were, sort of, natural and unavoidable.

Some Faces of Mysticism

Far from the original spirit of love and obedience of God within the bounds of *Shariah* Sufism took on a variety of forms which made it a different religion in its own way. The first objection raised against it is the practice of celibacy among different mystic orders. Marriage and social relationship were considered a distraction from devotion of God. A Mystic's heart had to be uncontaminated and his nature not inclined to lust, so they denied themselves all bodily pleasures. Marriage is the Prophet's tradition. A strange version of Mysticism appeared in the Islamic middle period (1200-1550 AD) in Turkey, Syria and Iran. There emerged groups of ascetics or *Dervishes*, as they were commonly called. They practiced mendicancy, itinerancy, celibacy and self-mortification. Theirs was a striking form of social deviance. They went nude or scantily dressed up in improper clothing, shaving all bodily or facial hair and used hallucinogens and intoxicants. They avoided family life and rejected all established social customs. They practiced what they called *chahar zarb* or four strokes in which they shaved off their eye brows, head, moustaches and beard with the view that a clean face reflected the divine. These *Dervish* groups took the form of two movements, the *Qalandariyah* flourishing in Syria and Egypt under Irani leadership, notably Jamal-ud-Din Savi and the *Haideriyah* in Iran, its founder was Qutb-al-Din Haider. Both movements spread to India and Asia Minor.

In the next few centuries many such groups sprang up in the Islamic Caliphate. These included the *Abdals of Rum*, *Jamis*, *Bektasis*, and *Shams-i-Tabrizi* in Asia Minor, and *Madaris* and *Jalalis* in Muslim India which led to the emergence of sub orders like the *Chishtiyah-*

Qalandariyah. Mysticism became a popular religion. One of the reasons this form of asceticism became popular was, according to a writer, that there was a water tight separation in pre-modern Islamic history, between the official religions of the cultural elite on the one hand and low and popular religion of the illiterate masses on the other hand. This religion is found in more or less the same form especially in the subcontinent. Different scholars of that time portrayed them as ‘rabble’ or ‘shameless characters’. Such details about these deviant *Dervishes* can be found in the writings of Abd-al-Rehman Al Jawbari, Nasir-ud-Din Tusi and Mohammad al Khatib. The Sufis of that time also strongly condemned these *Dervishes* for their unreligious ways. Some even considered them worse than infidels. According to a European observer of the Ottoman society of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Giovan Antonio Menavino described them as “illiterate and unable to do anything manly, living like beasts.... They fooled ignorant and credulous people and extracted material benefits from them...”⁵ *Qalandars*, like the people around them were equally ignorant of the true religion. They exploited the religious sensitivities of the people. They attracted and are still attracting people of feeble intellect who have no solid background knowledge of religion. Ahmet Karamustafa quotes Fazlur Rahman, who also strongly denounced these groups and wrote:

This phenomenon of popular religion very radically changed the aspect of Sufism even if it did not entirely displace its very ideal. For practical purposes Islamic society underwent metempsychosis. Instead of being a method of moral self-discipline and elevation and genuine spiritual enlightenment, Sufism was now transformed veritable spiritual jugglery through auto-hypnotic transports and vision just as at the level of doctrine it was being transmuted into a half-delirious theosophy... This, combined with the spiritual demagogy of many Sufi Sheikhs, opened the way for all kind of aberration, not the least of which was charlatanism. Ill-balanced majdhubs....parasitic mendicants, exploiting dervishes proclaimed Muhammad’s Faith in the heyday of Sufism. Islam was at the mercy of spiritual delinquents. (Karamustafa 2006)

The *Dervishes* neither prayed nor fasted. The *Qalandars* and *Abdals of Rum* used the utterance of *takbir* (God is the Greatest) as a ritual which may have replaced daily prayers. Music and dance had an important place in the gatherings of the *Abdals* and the *Jamis*. They also practiced self-laceration and self- cauterization. They carved names and figures on

⁵(Karamustafa 2006)

their bodies, yet another violation of Islamic law in which tattoos are forbidden.

Sufism criticizes institutional Islam and its ritual and accompanying dogma and their irrational aspect. So it is basically a problem of the difference between essence and form. The Sufis claim to carry the essence of religion and the *Ulema*, the form. Formal Islam has never accepted the validity of Sufism, which in turn claims to grow within the domains of Islam. If the claim that Sufism grows within the bounds of *shariah* then the question arises which *shariah*, because we don't have an 'Islamic *shariah*' as such as, Shuja Alhaq in his *A Forgotten Vision*,⁶ explains. There is a '*Sunni shariah*' and a '*Shia shariah*' and both have been derived from different interpretation of the same divine source, the Holy Quran.

Political and Economic Aspects of Sufism

As Sufism came out of its inner worldly mysticism, *tariqa* and cults of *awliya* emerged as new social institutions. *Tariqa* was the establishment of a *silsilah*, or a spiritual chain of intermediaries. This was the beginning of Sufism as a communal mission, a rise of a class of intermediaries between God and community. The ever growing community, which gathered around the Sufis on shrines, *khankahs* and *dergah*, developed distinct rites and practices. The institution of *waqf* or charitable endowment was important in the creation of social Sufi orders. The wealthy elite endowed the Sufis with different facilities, donating land, houses and even money. The other most important factor in the development of Sufism was the political patronage. It became a respectable vocation amongst the cultural elite coming forward as a key part of Islamic high culture.⁷ From the elite, the effects of Sufi piety gradually spread into the lower urban and rural culture. We have the examples of quite a few hereditary Sufi *silsilahs* or families, in Pakistan, who have an active role in our political system. They have a big and a very dedicated circle of followers, in certain cases it is more of ignorance or fear than devotion.

The too much worldliness of the new Sufi orders resulted into clashes between different *Dervish* and Sufi groups. The *Dervishes* were the renouncers of the world while the Sufis were getting more and more

⁶ (Alhaq 1996)

⁷ (Karamustafa 2006)

involved into the affairs of the material world. Ascetic renunciation could not accept institutional Sufism. This state of affair continued for a long time but gradually the two merged together. Another factor in case of *Dervishes* is their ethnicity.⁸ The practice of world renunciation is arisen primarily in the Iranian, Turkish, and Indian cultures while we do not find any such movements in the Arab regions. The Arab religiosity was contrary to the *Dervish* piety. To whatever group or movement the Mystics belonged the fact that came to light was the flexibility of the *Awliyas* and the *Ulemas* on politically and socially sensitive issues. At such a point one finds himself losing faith in all religious institutions. Standard of objectivity cannot be applied to mystical experience.

Sufism and Celibacy

In the early phase of Sufism, under the influence of Christianity, celibacy was favored and marriage and social relationships were considered as distractions from the devotion of God. A Sufi's heart had to be uncontaminated and their nature not inclined to lust. They denied themselves all bodily pleasures. Later the trends changed in some of the Sufi orders, as islamically, bachelor life was discouraged. Marriage was the Prophet's (pbuh) tradition. It was regarded a religious duty by many of the Muslims. Among Muslim mystics Ali Hajwery favored celibacy provided the Sufi is able to control his sexual desires. There has been a controversy over the issue of the use of metaphors of romantic love and sexuality in Sufi poetry.

On the other extreme there is Ibn-e-Arabi who feels a mystical significance in the sexual act itself. He likened the physical union with women to the spiritual union with God. He went on further to state that a man engaged in the sexual act in the realization of God in women; the act becomes a means of perfection for the mystic.⁹

Iqbal and Sufism

Iqbal had the orthodox perspective that identifies Islam with *Sharia* and distrusts all forms of Sufism which negate the 'Self' or 'Ego'. Although Iqbal was raised in an environment infused with Sufi influences, his views went through a radical change during and after his

⁸ Ibid

⁹(Hoffman-Ladd 1992)

stay in Europe.¹⁰ He became a strong proponent of Muslim unity and longed for those golden days of the powerful Muslim *Ummah* and the glory of Muslim empire when the call for prayers resounded in the West. In his desire for rebuilding the 'Muslim nation' his thoughts shifted from Sufism to orthodoxy and he wanted to take back his nation to the pristine simplicity of orthodox Islam. He was brought to this conclusion that Sufism was responsible for the loss of Muslim dominance, as it deviated from the path of original Islam. For Iqbal, 'self' or 'ego' was the main asset of an individual, the moving force, driving him forward and it needed to be strengthened under all conditions. The Sufis on the other hand preached world denial and self- negation and this was the antithesis between Islam and Sufism.¹¹

What is True Islamic Sufism?

Islam is vibrant and it demands continuous effort, and divorced from action it loses its real meaning. It has nothing to do with 'popular sufism' of shrines and strangely clad ascetics and music and dances. Dr. Absar Ahmad in his introduction to the English translation of Dr. Absar Ahmad's book '*Haqiqat-e-Tassawuf*', defines Tassawuf or Sufism as the, "inner dimension of faith and devotional religious practices. The practice of Sufism developed not in the renunciation of the outer life but bringing into its every aspect a consciousness of God and a ceaseless vigil on purity of motive and inner integrity".¹² "Sufism in its true spirit is dynamic and active and does not lead to repose and passivity".¹³ Junaid Baghdadi defines mysticism¹⁴ as "to isolate the eternal from the originated". By this definition it is not just love of God, Sufism is affirming the unity of God. Love for God implies self-negation and this produces an anti-social behavior.

Analysis of Sufism

R.C.Zaehner has made a detailed study of Islamic mysticism and observed:

The attraction of mysticism, I suppose, is that it has nothing to do with faith or hope or charity for that matter, but with a living experience of timeless

¹⁰(Alhaq 1996)

¹¹ ibid

¹²(Ahmad 2011)

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴(Zaehner 1974)

being and therefore the consciousness of the unreality of death. It does not necessarily have anything to do with God (let alone with the God of the Bible or even the Koran); and it certainly has nothing to do with religious law or dogma, nor, so far as I can see, is it necessarily concerned with morality. Rather, as some extremists would say, it promises you release from time and therefore death Zaehner 1974)

In his view the Quranic concept of God is wholly different from His creation hence God cannot be experienced by the loving hearts of Sufis, leading to a union with Him, and the soul of the Sufi still retaining some traces of individuality.¹⁵ Zaehner further notes that that the concept of love separates mysticism from religious orthodoxy and from the Quranic perspective love means nothing more than obedience. So Islam was not a 'congenial soil' in which mysticism of any kind could take root.¹⁶ A.J Ayer also considers mysticism as a unique kind of experience but the question arises, he says, whether mystical experience yields any knowledge and what does this experience establish.¹⁷ Philosophers have tried to find out the relation between 'the mystical' and 'the religious'. Stace considers mystical elements in the religion as the basis of universally accepted morality and not the religious element in the mystical. He also claims that religious and mystical experiences are essentially different in that the absolutes of the mystic deal with an undifferentiated unity and mysticism do not support any particular religion.¹⁸ Morewedge has pointed out that the mystical philosophies of Ibn-e-Sina and A. Nasafi were opposed to the traditional orthodox mysticism. The mystical systems of these two were in opposition to the Quranic theme.¹⁹ According to the Quran God created the world out of nothing (*ex nihile*). Ibn-e-Sina on the other hand, held that the world was an involuntary process of emanation from God's nature and for Nasafi the world was God and persons were modes of the divine and ultimately there is no existence but the light of God. The points of view of the orthodox and the mystics, regarding religion, are so widely different and opposing that the connection between the two cannot not be as strong as is usually claimed.

¹⁵(Morewedge 1976)

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

Conclusion

We have no means of verifying mysticism and mystical experiences, even if they are true. This can be attributed to the fact that Mysticism in its truest form is not the norm in today's world. It may be a psychological state or a state of consciousness. We cannot reject it outright, for that would be dogmatism. Mysticism may have its base in religion but it is not strictly derived from religion, it has taken a different course now. The two roads are parallel, one taken by mysticism and the other by religion. Let's not try to bring them on the same path for the differences will always remain.

Bibliography

- Ahmad, Israr. *The Reality Of Tassawuf*. 2nd. Translated by Dr. Basit Bilal Koshal. Lahore: Markazi Anjuman Khuddam-ul-Quran Lahore, 2011.
- Alhaq, Shuja. *A Forgotten Vision*. Lahore: Vanguard Books Pvt Ltd, 1996.
- Carus, Paul. "Mysticism." *The Monist* (Hegler Institute) XVIII, no. 1 (January 1908): 75-110.
- Hoffman-Ladd, Valerie J. "Mysticism and Sexuality in Sufi Thought and Life." *Mystics Quarterly* (Penn State University Press) Vol. XVIII, no. No. 3 (September 1992): 82-93.
- Karamustafa, Ahmet T. *God's Unruly Friends*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006.
- Lyman, Eugene W. "Faith and Mysticism." *The American Journal of Theology* (The University of Chicago Press) VIII, no. 3 (July 1904): 502-535.
- Morewedge, Parviz. "Critical Observations on Some Philosophies of Mysticism." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (Springer) VII, no. No.4 (1976): 409-424.
- Zaehner, R. C. "Mysticism without Love." *Religious Studies* (Cambridge University Press) Vol. 10, no. No.3 (September 1974): 257-264.