

## MUSLIM RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

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[Quotations in italics are transliterations of the Arabic]

### Introduction

O God! if I worship Thee in fear of Hell, burn me in Hell; and if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, withhold not Thine everlasting Beauty,

These words of the female Muslim mystic, Rabi'a of Basra,<sup>1</sup> are an expression of the basic idea of Muslim religious experience, who has it among Muslims and why.

The purpose of this paper is to present and to encourage discussion of issues raised by consideration of the topic of the Joint Annual Conference of the Modern Churchpeople's Union and the Alister Hardy Society 2004, *The God Experience: who has it and why?* from the Muslim perspective. The presentation consists of four sections: beginning with an introduction giving an overview of religious experience among the main Islamic sources of knowledge about God, and also an overview of the Islamic concept of God in relation to Muslim religious experience. The next section deals with the personal religious experience of ordinary Muslims in the sense of non-mystics or non-Sufis. The third section deals with the religious experience of Muslim mystics, namely, the Sufis, and the last section is concerned with Muslim religious experience in an inter-faith context. Following a systematic description of Sufi and Non-Sufi Muslim religious experiences, I argue that religious experience should be encouraged more and more as a direct and personal source or support of faith in God in our present time of suspicion, individualisation and outwardness.

### Religious Experience among Sources of Knowledge about God

As is well known, the concept of Muslim, in a narrow sense, refers to someone who adheres to God's revelation in the Qur'an as spoken by the Prophet Muhammad. It is possible to say that Muslim faith, knowledge and experience about God have generally been dependent on three main sources. Naturally, the most essential one among these is the Qur'anic revelation. It is the main religious source for Muslims in all aspects of religiosity, together with some sayings of the Prophet. It is pointed out in the Qur'an that

He is the One Who sends to His Servant Manifest Signs, that He may lead you from the depths of Darkness into the Light and verily, Allah is to you Most Kind and Merciful. (57: 9; see also 74: 54-55)<sup>2</sup>

For Muslims, the Qur'an shows explicitly or implicitly the ways of arriving at a sufficient knowledge and a strong belief concerning God's existence as well as His attributes.

The second and third sources are less common, and to some extent disputed among Muslims, although they also seem to be recommended in the Qur'an. One is the use of human intellectual capacities to see the signs of God in nature, in the world, from the micro-biological level to the astro-physical. This is in a sense a kind of natural theology, and is often advocated in the Qur'an.

The revelation of the Book is from Allah The Exalted in Power, full of Wisdom. Verily in the heavens and the earth, are signs for those who believe. And in the creation of yourselves and the fact that animals are scattered (through the earth), are Signs for those of assured Faith. (Qur'an, 45: 2-4)

Human beings must be able to recognise the signs of God in the universe using their intellectual capacities.

The other source, the third one, is the use of human inner experiential or spiritual capacities to see the signs of God within the self and to be directly aware of God's presence, providence and love. This is a way of inward personal religious experience, and it is also rooted in the Qur'an, together with the first two sources.

On the earth are Signs for those of assured Faith, as also in your own Selves: will yet not then see? (51: 20-21)

This is certainly a verse which could be taken as encouraging Muslim scholars, scientists, and Sufis to look deeper and deeper both into the marvels of nature, and into the marvels which the human being contains in himself, and to invent ever new ways for a profounder understanding of the world and human beings.<sup>3</sup>

It should, perhaps, be noted here that not all Muslims find all of these three sources significant and worthy of respect. As with Karl Barth in the Christian world, there have always been some Muslims in history who have advocated the Qur'anic revelation alone, who have argued against or at least underestimated both theological reasoning and mystical experience, or who have accepted Qur'anic authority and relied upon personal spiritual experiences but have ridiculed or underestimated theological reasoning, or who have accepted Qur'anic authority and rational theology but rejected Sufi experiences as sheer nonsense or as being harmful to the religion.

In the history of Islamic thought, for example, to the basic question of how a person gets knowledge about God, the answer the Mu'tazilites gave was quite simple: with Reason ('*aql*'). They had their own particular conception of faith (*iman*) as essentially identified with 'knowledge'. And here they proved to be perfect rationalists. And by 'knowledge by reason' they meant knowledge acquired by reasoning and deduction (*istidlal*), knowledge based on logical argument.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, however, the early jurists and theologians, such as Malik b. Anas and his followers were content with a theological knowledge rooted in the Qur'an. Like the Sufis, who believed that God could be apprehended directly, these traditionalists sought the ground of their belief in God in a non-rational sphere: that of revelation or authority. The existence of God was given directly in scripture, according to the former, and in the mystical process of direct apprehension, according to the latter.<sup>5</sup>

In our opinion, arguably together with the majority of Muslims, however, these sources about God are not mutually exclusive; and should not be reduced to any one or two of them. Of course, the Qur'anic revelation is the main source of Islam, but in it, the other human sources are recommended for use; and Islamic history also shows that both of them are useful for religion, if not indispensable. As al-Ghazali points out, even faith based on

authority is perfected gradually with rational evidence and personal experience. He writes as follows concerning the Islamic custom of requiring young boys to memorise the Qur'an

What has been said about belief is applicable to a boy in his early years in order that he may commit them to memory. Its meaning will be gradually unfolded to him. The first duty of a boy is to commit them to memory, then to understand them and then to believe them and then to know them as certain and sure ... True it is that the belief which is based on authority is not free from some weakness, but when it is certain and sure, it becomes perfect.<sup>6</sup>

So, after saying that we believe the importance of the first two religious sources, revelation and reason, we will now concentrate on the third one, religious experience among the Muslims.

### **The Concept of God in Islam in Relation to Religious Experience**

Before coming to Muslim religious experience, we should remember some basic characteristics of God in the Qur'an and Islamic tradition. Belief, or rather faith, in God is the first, most essential and central conviction in Islam, as it is in most of the other great world faiths, and certainly in the other theistic, originally Middle Eastern religions, Judaism and Christianity. The first thing a Muslim is required to believe in, is the existence and unity of God. Muslim theologians usually count the essential principles of faith as six; but they recognise that they can be reduced to three, namely, faith in God, in the prophethood, and in the Day of Judgement, and they acknowledge that, with a second reduction, the last three, too, can be reduced to faith in the existence of God, which comprises all other principles.<sup>7</sup>

One can look at the description of God first in the Qur'an, and then in Islamic tradition. Naturally, there are many verses in the Qur'an about the existence and attributes of God, and it is not easy to select from them without the risk of causing some misconceptions of particularisation. Nevertheless, it may be useful to take some direct quotes from the main source. In the first chapter, one can see verses, which succinctly describe some attributes of God and some aspects of the relationship between God and human beings:

Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds: Most Gracious, Most Merciful; Master of the Day of Judgement. Thee do we worship, and Thine aid we seek. Show us the straight way, the way of those on whom Thou has bestowed Thy Grace, those whose (portion) is not wrath. And who go not astray (1: 2-7).

According to the description in a verse from the middle of the Qur'an, which the Sufis often quote,

Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth.... (24:35).

However, He is not only "Light" but also Love as those verses imply:

It is He Who Creates from the very beginning, and He can restore (life). And He is the Oft-Forgiving, Full of loving-kindness (85: 13-14).

In addition,

He is the First and the Last, the Evident and the Hidden: And He has full knowledge of all things. (57:3)

It is also pointed out that

We are nearer to him [man] than (his) jugular vein. (Qur'an 50: 16)

God, as described by the Qur'an for the understanding of human beings, is the sole self-subsisting, all-pervading, eternal, and Absolute Reality. He is the first and the last, the seen and the unseen. He is transcendent in the sense that He in His full glory cannot be known or experienced by us finite beings. He is transcendent also because He is beyond the limitations of time, space, and sense-content. He was before time, space, and the world of the senses came into existence. He is also immanent both in human souls (*anfus*) and in the spatio-temporal order (*afaq*). The attributes of God are many and can be discovered in His names, but they can be summarised for the purpose of study under a few essential headings: Life, Eternity, Unity, Power, Truth, Beauty, Justice, Love, and Goodness.

God is, thus, a living, self-subsisting, eternal, and absolutely free creative reality which is one, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-beauty, most just, most loving, and all good.<sup>8</sup>

This definition is neither too anthropomorphic nor too agnostic; it gives a limited but also a sufficient idea about the Islamic concept of God.

### **The Concept of Religious Experience**

Now we come to Muslims' religious experiences, particularly their experience concerning the God just described. But before that, in order to be able to understand each other in an inter-faith context, we should briefly state what we understand by the concept of religious experience and its various kinds in the context of Western thought. For although there are similar phenomena of experience among Muslims, the very concept of religious experience is quite new for Muslims and academic research into this issue using the same language in the Islamic world seems to be quite rare so far. Indeed, a recent writer says,

in the case of the personal religious experience of contemporary Muslims, the basic research is lacking which would allow us to make even preliminary comparisons between Islam and other Abrahamic traditions.<sup>9</sup>

As Mohammad Iqbal points out

the treatment of religious experience, as a source of Divine knowledge, is historically prior to the treatment of other regions of human experience for the same purpose.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, the history of the concept of religious experience is relatively new even in Western thought. In the course of the eighteenth century, the more rationalistic arguments received formidable criticisms from Hume and Kant. In the end, Kant himself turned to "inner" experience, to our awareness of moral law, and argued that moral life is intelligible only if we postulate God and immortality. Many other writers, while accepting the shift from outer to inner, based their inference on a distinctive class of religious experience. If we describe this shift, in general terms, as a move from objective to subjective, from surveying the world at large for evidence of God to focusing attention on the personal and existential, it clearly was a shift of the greatest moment and one that still helps to determine our contemporary climate of theological thought.

The most important figure here is Friedrich Schleiermacher (d. 1834), with his bold insistence on the primacy of religious feeling.<sup>11</sup> The term "religious experience", however, was made popular in the West by William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* of 1902, where he defines religion as

the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.<sup>12</sup>

The key to the distinctiveness of religious experience lies for James in the phrase “to stand in relation to ... the divine.”<sup>13</sup> This whole approach to theology from religious experience was fiercely attacked by the rise and dominance of Barthian Neo-orthodoxy in the mid-twentieth-century. Now, however, religious experiencing has come very much back to the centre of the theological scene, in particular, of contemporary philosophy of religion.<sup>14</sup> We now have fairly convincing evidence that it is widespread.<sup>15</sup>

Before coming to Muslim religious experiences, we must also explore what, exactly, religious experience is, or, to put it in other way, what sort of experience this term refers to. According to a definition,

an experience is an event that one lives through (either as a participant or an observer) and about which one is conscious or aware.

In terms of this definition of experience in general,

religious experiences are held to differ from ordinary experiences in that what is experienced is taken by the person to be some supernatural being or presence (God either in Himself or as manifest in some action), a being related to God (a manifestation of God or personage such as the Virgin Mary), or some indescribable Ultimate Reality (such as the non-dual Absolute [Brahman] or Nirvana).<sup>16</sup>

Religious experiences are diverse. Richard Swinburne suggests five types of religious experience, classified according to how the experiences come about. Experience of God or Ultimate Reality mediated through (1) a common, public, sensory object, or (2) an unusual, public, sensory object, or (3) a private object that can be described in normal sensory language, or (4) a private object that cannot be described in normal sensory language, or (5) experience of God or Ultimate Reality that is not mediated by any sensory object.<sup>17</sup>

Three possibilities have been suggested about what kind of experience a religious experience is. According to Friedrich Schleiermacher, Rudolf Otto and William James, religious experience is “a feeling, or better, a complex of feelings” such as the feeling of dependence, or of religious dread (awe), or of longing for the transcendent being that fascinates us. For William Alston, religious experience is a type of perception. It has the same structure as sense perception. And according to defenders of a third view, a religious experience is

an experience the person who has it takes as religious. To take an experience as religious means that experiencers believe that a naturalistic explanation of the experience is insufficient, and that it can be explained only in terms of religious doctrines.<sup>18</sup>

Now we can deal with Muslim religious experiences using the same or similar language where possible.

### **Muslim Religious Experiences: Who has it and Why?**

It seems that it is possible and useful to divide the content of the concept of religious experience into two simply distinguishable types according to the state of the experiencer. One is the mystical religious experience, which is absolutely deep and dense, and is experienced by a relative minority of human beings. The other is ordinary and popular religious experience, which is relatively superficial and weaker, but is experienced by a majority of human beings. In general, when the term is used by philosophers of religion, it seems that they often use it in its first meaning, namely, as a deep and dense experience. But the second type of religious experience is also to be considered important, namely that

of normal, ordinary people, such as uneducated persons or educated students or scholars who have nothing to do with any real mystical tradition in their lives.

The aim of this distinction is not to assert that there are two mutually exclusive types of religious experience among Muslims, but is to enable analysis of their experiences in more detail. As Ibn Khaldun points out, very few people share the self-scrutiny of the Sufis, as negligence in this respect is almost universal.

Pious people who do not get that far perform, at best, acts of obedience, freed from the juridical study of how to be satisfactory and conforming (in the execution of the acts of divine worship). The (Sufis), however, investigate the results of (acts of obedience) with the help of mystical and ecstatic experience, in order to learn whether they are free from deficiency or not.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, Muslims designate the spiritual journey towards God by the term *mi'raj*, which means a ladder, an ascension, which varies according to individuals and their capacities. For a Muslim,

the highest imaginable level a human being can attain is the one that has been reached by the holy Prophet Muhammad; and this experience of his is also called *miraj*. So, in a state of consciousness and wakefulness, the Prophet had the vision (*ru'ya*) of being transported to heaven and graced with the honour of the Divine Presence. ... The Prophet himself employed the term *mi'raj* in connection with the common faithful, when he indicated that 'The service of worship is the *mi'raj* of the believer.' Evidently to each according to his capacity and his merit.<sup>20</sup>

So we can follow a bottom-up approach and start our examination of Muslim religious experiences with the experiences of ordinary (non-Sufi) Muslims.

### **Religious Experiences of Ordinary (non-Sufi) Muslims**

Religious experiences include many different kinds of personal and subjective experiences, and the experiences of ordinary people have not usually been recorded in books, at least up to recent times. So it is not easy to make a classification; nevertheless if one does attempt such a classification, there would be three main groups of experiences.

1. Experience of the Awareness of God in the Observation of Creation: The Qur'an itself has several passages in which it describes the phenomena of nature as "signs" of God:

Verily in the heavens and the earth, are Signs for those who believe. (45:3)

It also says that

To Allah belong the East and the West: whithersoever ye turn, there is Allah's Face. For Allah is All-Embracing, All-Knowing. (2: 115)

Therefore, to reflect about the signs of God in the universe and to try to experience His face everywhere is a religious duty for a Muslim's reason and heart imposed on it by the Qur'an.

During the spiritual journey of Muslims, God is experienced first of all as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Humanity begins its journey to God in this world, which displays, in its existence, forms, harmony, and laws, of the Creator who bestowed existence upon it. The Muslim sees total obedience to God as the natural consequence of His being the Creator of the world as well as the Being who rules over the universe and whose will governs all things. Islamic spirituality is involved with this awareness of God's rule over the world, the

necessity of submission to His will and the judgement God makes upon all human action, which He knows and in which He is present.<sup>21</sup> Yunus Emre, a medieval Turkish Sufi poet, expresses this sort of Muslim experience in a quatrain like this:

With the mountains and rocks  
I call you out, my God;  
With the birds as day breaks  
I call you out, my God.<sup>22</sup>

A different version of this kind of religious experience is an experience of “the light of the faith” in God as the result of one’s observing a certain trait in a pious person. In this kind of experience, someone looks at the face of a human being and sees on that face “the light of the faith” coming from God as a gracious gift. This seems to be a common experience among Muslims from the time of the Prophet, through the time of al-Ghazali, to the present day. Al-Ghazali mentions such an experience when he speaks about the nature of faith. For him, faith (*iman*) is not of such a nature that it could be obtained through the activities of reason, like establishing abstract proofs, making systematic classifications, hair-splitting argumentation, etc. He says that

Nay, *iman* is a kind of illuminating ‘light’ (*nur*) which God Himself throws into the hearts of His servants as a free and gracious gift. Sometimes it comes in the form of a firm and irresistible conviction welling up from the innermost soul, which is completely ineffable.

And as the cause of such a faith, he mentions this sort of experience by giving examples from his time and the time of the Prophet Muhammad:

Sometimes, it occurs as the result of one’s observing a certain trait in a pious man; one feels, while one sits and talks with the man, a flash of light suddenly coming from him and striking one. Sometimes, again, it is caused by some personal circumstance. Once a Bedouin who had been offering resistance to the Prophet with bitter enmity came to him. When his eyes fell upon the brilliant face of the Prophet and saw a scintillating light of Prophethood coming forth from it, he said, ‘By God, this is not the face of a liar!’ And he asked the Prophet to tell him about Islam, and became a Muslim.<sup>23</sup>

Yunus Emre points to this sort of religious experience as follows:

The yearning tormented my mind:  
I searched the heavens and the ground;  
I looked and looked, but failed to find.  
I found Him inside man at last.<sup>24</sup>

2. Experience of God’s Presence During Service unto God or Any Time (*ihsan*): In his celebrated expose of his teaching on faith (*iman*), submission (*islam*) and the best method of this submission, the Prophet Muhammad defined this last point in the following terms:

As to the embellishment (*ihsan*) of conduct, so render thy service unto God as if thou seest Him; even though thou dost not see Him, yet He seeth thee. This beatification, this best and most beautiful method of devotion or service unto God, is the spiritual culture of Islam. “Service unto God” is a most comprehensive term, and includes not merely worship, but also relates to human conduct throughout life.<sup>25</sup>

It is essential to perform the rituals of Islam as if in the presence of God or, at least, with the awareness that God sees and knows not only a Muslim’s actions but also his intentions.

*Ihsan* thus guards against the danger of the religious practices provided by revelation becoming dry rituals. It also serves to remind the Muslim that the presence of Allah is a reality. Therefore it is necessary for Muslims to maintain the remembrance and awareness of Allah’s presence in their hearts at all times.<sup>26</sup>

Of course, some Muslims realise *ih-san* just as a deepened intellectual understanding while some others realise it as a strong religious experience as if he or she sees God.

3. Experience of God's Help for a Good or Needy Person in a Miraculous Manner: This kind of experience is narrated both in the historical books and in some contemporary ones. As a historical example, one may remember al-Ghazali's experience of light, which God cast into his breast when he underwent a spiritual crisis that transformed him utterly.

In his autobiographical book, *Deliverance from Error*, Al-Ghazali writes that, when he was teaching students in Baghdad, in one of the most distinguished positions in the academic world of his day, he had caught the disease of scepticism.

The disease was baffling, and lasted almost two months, during which I was a sceptic in fact though not in theory nor in outward expression.<sup>27</sup>

At length God cures him of the malady, he says. But what is important in this autobiographical narration is that al-Ghazali mentions,

This did not come about by systematic demonstration or marshalled argument, but by a light which God most high cast into my breast.

And immediately after reporting his own personal religious experience, he reminds his readers that

whoever thinks that the understanding of things Divine rests upon strict proofs has in his thought narrowed down the wideness of God's mercy.<sup>28</sup>

According to al-Ghazali, if someone is already a believer in God and really sincerely wants to have a more direct and deep religious experience, he or she has more chance to have it. For him, if someone wants to be included within the travellers of the hereafter with God's grace as his friend, the doors of guidance are opened up for him or her while he or she remains engaged in actions attached to God-fear and restrains him or herself from passions and lusts making efforts in discipline and self mortification.

Owing to these efforts, a light from God falls in his heart as God says: 'Whosoever strives for Us, We shall guide them in our paths, for God is assuredly with those who do right.' (29: 69)<sup>29</sup>

As for contemporary examples of this sort of religious experience, it may be said that although they have not been a topic of academic research in Muslim countries, at least not in Turkey, they have been featured in the media in recent years. Recently at least three national, private broadcasting TV channels in Turkey have been featuring this sort of experience every week; and one of them has published two books, entitled *The Door of the Mystery*, based on a programme shown on TV in recent months. We can classify the stories of religious experiences in these books as follows:

1. A dream, usually with a religious content, coming true within a short period of time. There are a lot of experiences of this sort.<sup>30</sup>

2. An intuition of a child coming true. For example, a child says to his mother that this or that building will be destroyed; this or that person will die soon. The Mother does not believe it; but that night an earthquake happens and what the child said comes true.<sup>31</sup>

3. God's guidance in a dream. According to one story, an intellectual atheist discusses the creation of the universe in the context of God's existence with a young village boy; and argues against the concept of creation and tries to explain it as a kind of natural formation. But he was also influenced just a little by the ideas of the boy. After the discussion they go to



sleep, and the atheist has a dream. He rises up to the sky and hears a voice saying “*Enbiya Otuz... Enbiya Otuz...*” (“*al-Anbiyaa Thirty... al-Anbiyaa Thirty...*”) Then he falls down to the earth, and wakes up; but remembers the voice. In the morning he asks the boy, who says that *al-Anbiyaa* is the name of a chapter, *surat*, in the Qur’an, and that the thirtieth verse should be looked at. The boy opens his Qur’an, finds *al-Anbiyaa* thirty, and they are surprised to see that it is about their discussion and particularly about the specific concern of the atheist:

Do not the unbelievers see that the heavens and the earth were joined together (as one unit of creation), before We clove them asunder? We made from water every living thing. Will they not then believe? (21: 30)<sup>32</sup>

4. Resurrection of a dead person to help a needy one and then that person suddenly disappears. Someone talks to and helps a boy and his mother; after a few days, the father of the boy looks for the man to thank him but finds out that he had died about a month before.<sup>33</sup>

5. Being in two different places at once to help a needy person. In answer to the prayer of a poor woman, her husband comes back from the city where he works and gives her sufficient money, and afterwards he disappears. The woman phones his house in that distant city and finds out that he was there all the time.<sup>34</sup>

6. Power of Prayer or Curse. After the sincere prayer of a girl in a difficult situation, her family suddenly change their minds and approve of her desire to go to university.<sup>35</sup> After the curse of a pious man, a cruel rich man loses his sons and wealth.<sup>36</sup>

7. Near-Death Experiences.<sup>37</sup>

Although these experiences and some others are not directly an experience of God, they are interpreted by Muslims as the result of God’s help, providence, and mercy. As a matter of fact, ordinary Muslims do not believe that human beings, even the greatest prophets, can have a direct experience of the ontological essence of God. A verse in the Qur’an says that

“no vision can grasp Him” (6: 1003),

and even illiterate Muslims know the anecdote of Moses’ desire to see God and what happened then as narrated in the Qur’an:

When Moses came to the place appointed by Us, and his Lord addressed him, he said: ‘O my Lord! Show (Thyself) to me, that I may look upon Thee.’ Allah said: ‘By no means canst thou see Me (direct); but look upon the mount; if it abide in its place, then shalt thou see Me.’ When his Lord manifested Himself to the mount, He made it as dust, and Moses fell down in a swoon. When he recovered his senses he said: ‘Glory be to Thee! To Thee I turn in repentance, and I am the first to believe.’ (7: 143)

Thus, for an ordinary Muslim, the concept of an experience of God can only mean the experience of God’s attributes or actions such as the experience of God’s help, God’s mercy, or God’s providential foreordination, etc., but not the experience of God Himself. The experiences mentioned above are of this type; and they may be considered as God experiences in the broader sense. They are accepted by the Muslims who have these experiences as extraordinary or supernatural phenomena that cannot be explained without reference to God. They show God’s concern to needy people and God’s nearness and love to good people as well as God’s existence and presence everywhere. Ordinary Muslims do not expect to have personal religious experience and are reluctant to speak about it; nevertheless, if and when they do have such experiences they are of course very happy, considering them to be God’s blessing, favour and gift to them, and their belief in God’s presence, justice and mercy grows stronger in both heart and mind.

That many Muslims have religious experiences is good both for supporting their own personal self-confidence of their faith in God as Muslims, for supporting the genuineness of their religion of Islam and also for supporting the belief in God and in the immortality of the soul as defended by almost all the great religions against naturalism. For, as Mohammad Iqbal says,

the revealed and mystic literature of mankind bears ample testimony to the fact that religious experience has been too enduring and dominant in the history of mankind to be rejected as mere illusion. There seems to be no reason to accept the normal level of human experience as fact and reject its other levels as mystical and emotional. The facts of religious experience are facts among other facts of human experience and, in the capacity of yielding knowledge by interpretation; one fact is as good as another.<sup>38</sup>

However, as some Muslim scholars were against Sufism in the past so some still are today, and there are some contemporary Muslim writers who argue against the concept of religious experience. In a Barthian fashion, it is argued that

in Islamic thought, it is generally agreed that authentic and publicly acceptable knowledge about God can only issue from *wahy* itself, not from a personal religious experience.<sup>39</sup>

However, we believe that religious experience must be encouraged more and more by Muslim scholars and theologians of today as was done by Christian theologians in recent centuries. For having personal religious experience is contradictory neither to believing in revelation (*wahy*) nor to having a sincere religiously based faith in God. By contrast it would support and strengthen an existent belief in God. It is a similar case to the Prophet Abraham's anecdote narrated in the Qur'an:

Abraham said: 'My Lord! Show me how Thou givest life to the dead.' He said: 'Dost thou not then believe?' He said: 'Yea! But to satisfy my own heart.'... (2: 260)

Thus, in order to satisfy the heart of a believer, religious experience should be encouraged. As a matter of fact, Islam actually encourages the use of both intellect and experience, of both *fikr* and *dhikr*, the two modes of perception:

Thought, *fikr*, is necessary to analyse the human world, to analyse everything that is created and can be understood with our intellectual faculties; and *fikr* and *tafakkur*, thinking, pondering, is an important duty of the believer – unless he wants to ponder and figure out the essence of God, and that is prohibited. But *fikr*, as an intellectual activity, is almost as important as *dhikr*, the thinking about God, the constant remembrance of God which is supposed to polish the human heart until it becomes like a clear mirror. The Qur'an (13:28) has emphasised the importance of *dhikr*, particularly in the beautiful *aya* where it is said *a-la bi-dhikr Allahi tatma'innu'l-qulub*, 'Verily, by remembering God the hearts become peaceful (or Quiet).' These two modes of thinking, the intellectual, *fikr* and *tafakkur*, and the love-intoxicated and loving *dhikr*, are always used together; they form the warp and weft of our human life.<sup>40</sup>

### **Religious Experiences of Sufi Muslims**

Muslim mystics are generally called Sufis, and

the Sufis have looked upon themselves as Muslims who take seriously God's call to perceive his presence both in the world and in the self. They tend to stress inwardness over outwardness, contemplation over action, spiritual development over legalism, and cultivation of the soul over social interaction. On the theological level, Sufis speak of God's mercy, gentleness, and beauty far more than they discuss the wrath, severity, and majesty that play important roles in both *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *kalam* (dogmatic theology).<sup>41</sup>

Abu Bakr al-Kalabadhi's *Ta'arruf: The Doctrine of the Sufis*, is accepted as an authoritative text book on Sufi doctrine. According to al-Kalabadhi's descriptions, Sufis had understanding of God, and journeyed unto God, and turned away from what was other than God.

They were spiritual bodies, being upon earth celestial, and with creation divines: silent and meditative, absent (from men) but present (with God), kings in rags, outcasts from every tribe, possessors of all virtues and lights of all guidance; their ears attentive, their hearts pure, their qualities concealed; chosen, Sufis, illuminated, pure.<sup>42</sup>

Sufism is usually considered as the inner dimension of Islam. It

remains a vibrant living tradition which still maintains its position at the heart of traditional Islam, and contemporary practitioners of tasawwuf draw upon scriptural sources to justify their tradition and their access to direct experience of Allah's immanence through their practices.<sup>43</sup>

Mohammad Iqbal offers five general observations on the main characteristics of the Sufi or mystic experience:

1. The first point to note is the immediacy of this experience.
2. The second point is the unanalysable wholeness of mystic experience.
3. The third point to note is that to the mystic, the mystic state is a moment of intimate association with a unique Other Self, transcending, encompassing, and momentarily suppressing the private personality of the subject of experience.
4. Since the quality of mystic experience is to be directly experienced, it is obvious that it cannot be communicated.
5. The mystic's intimate association with the eternal, which gives him a sense of the unreality of serial time, does not mean a complete break with serial time. The mystic state in respect of its uniqueness remains in some way related to common experience.<sup>44</sup>

The Sufis viewed God as beloved, and lover, and they wanted at least closeness (*uns*) with Him. The worshipper's relation to God, is described by the Qur'an as "nearer to him than the jugular vein" (Qur'an 50:15). Their main goal is to reach the (recognition of the) oneness of God (*tawhîd*), the love of God (*mahabbah*), and the gnosis of God (*ma'rifah*). In their journey towards God they have many experiences; but it seems possible to classify them as three main types of experiences. First and foremost are the various experiential states and stations, then there are experiences of the removal of the veil (*kashf*) of sensual perception, and also experiences of miracles (*karamat*).

1. Experience of States (*ahwal*) and Stations (*maqamat*): The Sufis came to represent asceticism, retirement from the world, and devotion to divine worship. Then, they developed a particular kind of perception which comes about through ecstatic experience. The exertion and worship of a Sufi novice must lead to a 'state' that is the result of his exertion. That state may be a kind of divine worship. Then, it will be firmly rooted in the Sufi novice and become a 'station' for him.<sup>45</sup>

There are many ways in which the Sufis have described these experiential steps leading from an individual to God. Especially in the case of the states, it is hardly possible to limit them to a set number. In one of the earliest authoritative texts of Sufism, Abu Nasr al-Sarraj enumerates ten states of the soul: constant attention (*muraqabah*), proximity (*qurb*), love (*mahabbah*), fear (*khawf*), hope (*raja*), spiritual yearning (*shawq*), familiarity (*uns*),

tranquillity (*itmi'nan*), contemplation (*mushahadah*) and certainty (*yaqin*). And one of the earliest and finest accounts of the stations in Sufism is the Forty Stations (*Maqamat-i arba'in*) of the eleventh-century Sufi master Abu Sa'id ibn Abi'l-Khayr. These are intention, conversion, repentance, discipleship, spiritual struggle, patience, invocation, contentment, opposition to the carnal soul, agreement, surrender, confidence, asceticism, worship, abstention, sincerity, truthfulness, fear, hope, annihilation, subsistence, the science of certainty, the truth of certainty, gnosis, effort, sanctity, love, ecstasy, proximity, meditation, union, unveiling, service, catharsis, aloneness, expansion, the ascertaining of the Truth, the supreme goal, and the fortieth is Sufism in its real sense.<sup>46</sup>

The Sufi continues to progress from station to station, until he reaches the recognition of the oneness of God (*tawhîd*) and the gnosis (*ma'rifah*) which is the desired goal of happiness. Thus, the Sufi must progress by such stages.

The basis of all of them is obedience and sincerity. Faith precedes and accompanies all of them. Their result and fruit are states and attributes. They lead to others, and again others, up to the station of the (recognition of the) oneness of God and of gnosis (*'irfan*).<sup>47</sup>

One of the most important of these stations is annihilation (*fana*) in God.

The Sufi goal is annihilation (*fana*) in Allah, which transforms the individual ego to become an instrument of the divine purpose in the world (*baqa*). Controversial among the Sufis is whether *fana* means dissolution of the human ego before the divine, or whether it is absolute union with God, the latter interpretation being condemned by orthodox Islam.<sup>48</sup>

Mainly because of the different interpretations of the concept of *fana*, some writers claim that Sufism took two distinct forms, the "visionary" and the "unitary".

The adepts of the former, like al-Junayd and al-Ghazali, maintained that the ultimate goal of the mystic was vision (*mushahadah*, *mukashafah*); whereas the adepts of the latter, in Hindu fashion, maintained that in the final phase of the mystical experience, the mystic was united with the One or the Truth (*al-Haqq*), and in this union (*ittihad*) the dissolution or the extinction of the self was complete.

Majid Fakhry qualifies the former as "moderate forms of Islamic mysticism" and the latter as an "extravagant form of mysticism" and adds that the latter

met with staunch opposition and was never reconciled with Sunnite orthodoxy.<sup>49</sup>

The two foremost exponents of unitary mysticism, with its extravagant claims, were al-Bistami and al-Hallaj, who pushed the idea of self-annihilation to its logical limits and contended that it logically entailed total union (*ittihad*). The earlier mystics, and even al-Junayd, had stopped shorter of this. For al-Ghazali, as it had been for al-Junayd, the essence of mysticism

is simply the confession of God's unity (*tawhid*) or, as he sometimes put it, 'extinction in unity'. This confession of unity really meant, for al-Ghazali, the recognition that God was the Sole Being, the Sole Agent and the Sole Light in the Universe.<sup>50</sup>

However, there are some contemporary Muslim thinkers like Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who see self-annihilation in the sense of "union" with the Divine as "the highest level" (Nasr 1987, 322),

later mystics such as al-Ghazali and 'Ibn 'Arabi took stock, perhaps, of the lesson al-Hallaj's execution dramatically taught. Their interpretation of the mystical experience, however extravagant or even soul-wrenching, stopped short of the claim of union with God (*ittihad*); instead this concept was replaced by that of the confessing of unity (*tawhid*) by al-Ghazali, and by that of the unity of being (*wahdat al-wujud*) by Ibn 'Arabi.<sup>51</sup>

For Ibn 'Arabi,

the highest stage attainable to the human soul is the direct experiential stage (*dhawq*), which al-Ghazali and many other Islamic mystics have regarded as the ultimate goal of the soul. This is in contrast to al-Bistami and al-Hallaj, who believed that this ultimate goal was union (*ittihad*) with God. When the soul has attained the experiential stage it will have achieved the condition of self-annihilation (*fana*) and will be able to perceive visually and experientially the unity of all things, the Creator and His creation, the visible and the invisible, the eternal and the temporal.<sup>52</sup>

Yunus Emre explicitly states this unity of being as follows:

The universe is the oneness of Deity,  
The true man is he who knows this unity.  
You better seek Him in yourself,  
You and He aren't apart – you're one.<sup>53</sup>

This experience or view

differed, however, from the 'unitary' mysticism of al-Bistami and al-Hallaj in the respect that the latter two mystics' outlook was entirely personal or existential. The unity they were both talking of was simply the unity, or rather identity, of the mystic and God, often referred to in the literature as the Beloved, or simply the Truth (*al-Haqq*).<sup>54</sup>

To be sure, *tawhid*, understood in the sense of realisation of oneness with God, has been regarded by many Sufis as the ultimate stage of Sufism. But the other view, that *tawhid* is only a stage of the Sufi *suluk* and that the final stage is servanthood (*'ubudiyah*), and the ultimate truth is difference (*baqa*) rather than oneness, union, or unification (*fana, jam, ittihad*) has also been maintained by many other eminent Sufis.<sup>55</sup>

2. Experience of the Removal of the Veil (*Kashf*) of Sensual Perception: Mystical exertion, retirement, and *dhikr* exercises are followed by the removal of the veil (*kashf*) of sensual perception. The Sufi beholds divine worlds which a person subject to the senses cannot perceive at all. The spirit belongs to those worlds. When the spirit turns from external sense perception to inner perception, the senses weaken, and the spirit grows strong. It gains predominance and a new growth. The *dhikr* exercise helps to bring that about. It is like food to make the spirit grow. The spirit continues to grow and to increase. It had been knowledge. Now, it becomes vision. The veil of sensual perception is removed, and the soul realises its essential existence. This is identical with perception. The spirit now is ready for the holy gifts, for the sciences of the divine presence, and for the outpourings of the Deity. Its existence realises its own true character and draws close to the highest sphere, the sphere of the angels. The removal of the veil often happens to people who exert themselves in mystical exercise. They perceive the realities of existence as no one else does.<sup>56</sup>

The removal of the veil (*khasf*) constitutes the epistemological side of the Sufi religious experience. According to al-Ghazali, God

could not be known through rational discourse or speculation, as the philosophers had claimed or through union with him, as al-Bistami and al-Hallaj had claimed. Rather, He could be known through His self-unveiling (*khasf*) in the wake of an arduous and personal process of constant observation (*mushahadah*); that is, through the effulgence of the divine light.<sup>57</sup>

Similarly,

Ibn al-'Arabi asserts that unveiling is a mode of knowledge superior to reason, but he also insists that reason provides the indispensable checks and balances without which it is impossible to differentiate among divine, angelic, psychic, and satanic inrushes of imaginal knowledge.<sup>58</sup>

It is told that when the Prophet Muhammad was taken on his *mi'raj* into the immediate presence of God, the angel Gabriel had to remain at the *sidrat-i muntaha*, 'the lotus tree of the farthest distance,' because he can reach only the borders of the created universe, while the loving heart can enter the presence of God. So in Sufi tradition and particularly under the influence of Rumi, Gabriel is equated with the leading intellect which can bring the Prophet Muhammad and everyone who follows him to the borders of this universe, but only love and the removal of the veil can take the seeker further. Rumi explains that in a verse:

Intellect says, 'This world, this universe, has six borders which you cannot transgress.'  
Love says, 'There is a way, and I have gone over it very frequently.'<sup>59</sup>

Although the early Sufis had no desire to remove the veil and to have supernatural perception, as Ibn Khaldun points out, recent mystics

have turned their attention to the removal of the veil and the discussion of perceptions beyond (sensual perception).<sup>60</sup>

For, in the Sufis' opinion, as Yunus Emre stated in a poem,

God's truth is lost on the men of orthodoxy,  
Mystics refuse to turn life into forgery.  
Those who comment on the four books are heretics:  
They read the text, but miss the deep reality.<sup>61</sup>

Sufi metaphysics and ontology are based on this epistemology of *khasf*. Among the Sufis, monistic and dualistic concepts of the relationship of Allah to his creation are known respectively as *wahdat al-wujud* (the unity of existence) and *wahdat al-shuhud* (the unity of experience). The Unity of Existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) upheld mainly by followers of Ibn'Arabi, conceived of God as emanating the creation from Himself as a self-manifestation. To explain the purpose of creation they cite the *Hadith*, or saying of the prophet, that Allah said,

I was a hidden treasure and I wanted to be known.

Despite Ibn'Arabi's note that there is an unbridgeable distinction between the *Rabb* (Lord) and the *'abd* (servant), his position tends towards monism. According to the Unity of Experience or *wahdat al-shuhud*, it is asserted, for example by Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi, that there is something other than God which exists. Against the background of this 'negative' material, we can clearly see God's positive attributes reflected in the world.<sup>62</sup>

Once we grasp the fact that we are not dealing here with a philosophical or theological system, we can begin to appreciate the difficulty of providing even an elementary understanding of *wahdat al-wujud* and *wahdat al-shuhud*.<sup>63</sup> As Ibn Khaldun points out,

competent recent Sufis say that during the removal (of the veil), the Sufi novice often has a feeling of the oneness (of existence). Sufis call that the station of 'combination' (*jam'*). But then, he progresses to distinguishing between existent things. That is considered by the Sufis the station of 'differentiation' (*farq*). That is the station of the competent gnostic.<sup>64</sup>

3. Experience of Miracles: All the Sufis are agreed in affirming the miracles (*karamat*) of the saints

such as walking on water, talking with beasts, travelling from one place to another, or producing an object in another place or at another time: all these examples are duly recorded in the stories and traditions, and they are also spoken of in the scriptures.

Such things may happen both in the time of the Prophet, and at other periods. For example,

after the death of the Prophet, this happened to 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, when he called Sariyah, saying, 'O Sariyah ibn Hisn, the mountain, the mountain!' 'Umar was then at Medina in the pulpit, and Sariyah was facing the enemy, a month's journey away. This story is well authenticated.<sup>65</sup>

The Sufis also perceive many future happenings in advance. With the help of their minds and psychic powers they are active among the lower existents, which thus become obedient to their will. According to a popular example of a miraculous experience of perceiving a future happening in medieval times, the authenticity of which cannot be determined however, "a traditionalist named Molla Kasim decides to destroy the transcriptions of Yunus Emre's poems. Getting hold of all of the poems, he sits on a river bank and starts tearing all the ones he finds heretical, and throws them into the river. After having destroyed about two thirds, he catches a glimpse of a poem whose last couplet has Yunus Emre's prediction about Molla Kasim. In the couplet, Yunus Emre warns himself:

Dervish Yunus, utter no word that is not true  
For a Molla Kasim will come to cross-examine you.

When Molla Kasim reads this prediction, he realises the greatness of Yunus, and he immediately stops destroying the poems."<sup>66</sup>

Miracles are not aimed at by the Sufis for their own sake. The great Sufis do not think much of the removal (of the veil) and of activity among the low existents. They give no information about the reality of anything they have not been ordered to discuss. They consider it a tribulation, when things of that sort happen to them, and try to escape them whenever they afflict them.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, some of them point out that, as marvels (*mu'izat*) were vouchsafed in the time of the Prophet in order to testify to the truth of his claim, so miracles (*karamat*) have happened at other periods for a similar reason. A true saint agrees with the Prophet both in words and mission; and the very appearance of miraculous powers in him only reinforce the Prophet and manifests his claim, strengthening his proof and right to be accepted in his mission and claim to be a prophet, and also affirms the principle that God is One.<sup>68</sup>

The Sufis recognise that some extraordinary powers and experiences do not belong to themselves only. For them, prophets are accorded marvels, saints miracles, but the enemies of God receive deceptions. They explain the difference between miracles and marvels as follows,

The miracle of the saint consists in an answer to prayer, or the completion of a spiritual state, or the granting of power to perform an act, or the supplying of the means of subsistence requisite and due to them, in a manner extraordinary: whereas the marvels accorded to prophets consist either of producing something from nothing, or of changing the essential nature of an object.<sup>69</sup>

They do not consider removal of the veil sound, unless it originates in straightforwardness. People who do not eat and who retire from the world, such as sorcerers, and other ascetics, may obtain removal of the veil without the existence of straightforwardness. Ibn Khaldun gives a natural explanation for the extraordinary experiences of non-Sufis, or non-Muslims who have not got straightforwardness. He continues his natural explanations with a metaphor of mirrors. Straightforwardness

may be compared with (the reflections of) a mirror. If it is convex or concave, the object reflected by it appears in a distorted form different from the actual form of the object, but if

the mirror is flat, the object appears in its correct form. As far as the 'states' impressed upon the soul are concerned, straightforwardness means to the soul what flatness means in a mirror.<sup>70</sup>

As Ibn Khaldun points out many jurists and muftis have

summarily disapproved of everything they came across in the (Sufi) path.<sup>71</sup>

There are some scholars or thinkers who defend similar ideas in this century, too. Some Muslim thinkers maintain that Sufism is so much in opposition to the spirit and dogma of Islam that it can be considered a heresy or even a quasi-separate religion inadmissible for true believers. The incompatibility of Sufism with Islam is deduced from pantheistic ideas found in mysticism, ideas that, allegedly, destroyed the Islamic idea of God,

and also from the Sufi opposition of *ma'rifa* (gnosis, intuitive knowledge) to *'ilm* (religious knowledge, discursive learning), its undermining of the authority of the *'ulama'*, its reliance on the teaching of *pirs*, sheikhs, and *walis*, and its ethical propensity not to adhere to the formal observance of religious prescriptions (even infractions of them being permissible) but on internal perfection, for adherence to rules and regulations of the *tariqa*.<sup>72</sup>

It seems to us that it does not take a Muslim scholar to distinguish from Islam, certain alien sources of Sufi interpretations and some negative aspects of the Sufi way of life. Sufism is part of the Islamic tradition as much as are Islamic philosophy or even theology. In its pure essence, not, of course, in the many decadent versions, it represents the inner and spiritual dimension of Islam throughout Islamic history. We find Ibn Khaldun's evaluations about them much nearer to the truth. He was not a Sufi but a Sufi sympathiser, scholar and philosopher. In his evaluations, the Sufis discuss topics. Firstly, they discuss pious exertions, the resulting mystical and ecstatic experiences, and self-scrutiny concerning one's actions. Secondly, they discuss the removal of the veil and the perceivable supernatural realities. The third topic is concerned with activities in the various worlds and among the various created things connected with different kinds of acts of divine grace. The fourth topic is concerned with expressions that are suspect if understood in their plain meaning. In Sufi technical terminology, they are called 'ecstatic utterances' (*shatahat*).<sup>73</sup>

As for their discussion of pious exertions and stations, of the mystical and ecstatic experiences that result, and of self-scrutiny with regard to possible shortcomings in the things that cause these experiences, this is something that nobody ought to reject. These mystical experiences of the Sufis are sound ones. Secondly, most of the Sufi discussion of the removal of the veil, of the reception of the realities of the higher things, and of the order in which the created things issue, tends to result in somewhat ambiguous statements. The discussion is based upon the intuitive experience of Sufis, and those who lack such intuitive experience cannot have the mystical experience that the Sufis receive from it. Therefore, we should simply ignore Sufi discussion of those matters, leaving it alone, just as we leave alone the ambiguous statements of the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*. Thirdly, the discussion of the acts of divine grace experienced by Sufis, the information they give about supernatural things, and their activity among the created things, these also are sound and cannot be disapproved of, even though some religious scholars do tend to express disapproval. Many such acts of divine grace were experienced by the men around Muhammad and the great early Muslims. This is a well-known fact. Finally, as for the suspect expressions which the Sufis call "ecstatic utterances" (*shatahat*), it should be acknowledged that they are removed from sense perception, gripped by inspiration. In describing their inspiration they cannot speak clearly. But any Sufis who are not removed from sense perception and are not in the grip of a state when they make utterances of this kind deserve censure.<sup>74</sup>



## Inter-faith Religious Experience of Sufi Muslims

1. Early Sufis and Christian Monks: The first Muslim Sufis, who well understood the wide spiritual dimension and tolerance of Islam, were not afraid of speaking with, and profiting from, other ascetics and virtuous persons who were adherents of a different religion. They said that the objectives of all were the same; only the tradition was different. By this they meant that the goals of the Muslim Sufis and those of true ascetics from other religions are the same; only the ways, which lead to this common goal, are different. The ways to God are as numerous as the breaths of His creatures. God the Almighty says in the Qur'an:

And those who strive in Our (Cause), - We will certainly guide them to Our Paths: For verily Allah is with those who do right. (29: 69)

A poet expressed this meaning in Persian like this:

Sometimes I withdraw myself to the church, sometimes I stay in the mosque. To find You behind each door, my God, is my religion.<sup>75</sup>

Because of the spiritual equality of the revealed religions some of the first Islamic Sufis met with sincere Christian monks, talked to them and related their wisdom to their own environment. As an example of these Sufis, Ibrahim ibn Adham tells us:

I learned the knowledge of God from a monk, whose name was Abba Simeon. I went to see him in his cell and asked him: 'Abba Simeon, how long have you lived in this cell of yours?'

He replied: 'For seventy years.'

'And what do you eat?'

'O Hanif, what makes you ask that?'

'I should very much like to know.'

'Well, then, one pea every night.'

'And what is it that fortifies your soul so that you can satisfy your hunger with one single pea?'

'Do you see the monastery down there, in front of you? Once every year the monks come to me, decorate my cell, walk around it in procession and honour me. Every time my soul becomes lethargic and slow in its devotions I recall that occasion. And thus I gain strength to endure one year of effort for that one moment of glory. You too must seek to endure a moment of effort for eternal glory.' Thus he poured into my heart reverence for divine knowledge. Finally he said:

'Have you received enough, or do you ask for even more?'

'I desire more.' Then he gave me a wineskin containing twenty peas and told me: 'Go down to the monastery. They have seen what I have given you'

I went and when I had entered the monastery, the Christians gathered around me and said:

'O Hanif, what has the sheikh given to you?'

'Some of his food.'

What are you going to do with that? We have a greater right to it than you do. State your price.'

'Twenty dinars.'

And so they paid me twenty dinars; whereupon I returned to the old man, who asked:

'What have you done with the peas?'

'I sold them.'

'For how much?'

'For twenty dinars.'

'You were wrong to do that. If you had asked twenty thousand, they would have paid you that. Lo, such great glory has a man who does not serve Him. Imagine then the glory that must belong to him who truly serves God. Turn O Hanif, completely towards your Lord and abandon this coming and going.'<sup>76</sup>

As a second example one can give the anecdote which Hujwiri relates from Ibrahim Khawwas:

Once I heard that in Rum there was a monk who had been seventy years in a monastery. I said to myself: 'Wonderful! Forty years is the term of monastic vows; what is the state of this man that he has remained there for seventy years?' I went to see him. When I approached, he opened a window and said to me: 'O Ibrahim, I know why you have come. I have not stayed here for seventy years because of monastic vows, but I have a dog foul with passion, and I have taken my abode in this monastery for the purpose of guarding the dog, and preventing it from doing harm to others.' On hearing him say this I exclaimed: 'O Lord. Thou art able to bestow righteousness on a man even though he be involved in sheer error.' He said to me: 'O Ibrahim, how long will you seek men? Go and seek yourself, and when you have found yourself keep watch over yourself, for this passion clothes itself every day in three hundred and sixty diverse garments of godhead and leads men astray.'<sup>77</sup>

These anecdotes show that the early Sufis had no reservations about meeting with Christian monks, speaking with them, and taking spiritual advice and instruction from them. According to the great Sufis, who knew that God is the Lord of all worlds and that his mercy encompasses all his creatures, God is the goal of all people and the essence of religions is equal even if the ways are different. The Qur'an invited all followers of the revealed religions to this agreement and unity in the essence (see 3: 64).<sup>78</sup>

2. Ibn al-'Arabi, Yunus Emre, and Mawlana J. al-Rumi's Inter-faith Experiences: The following lines of Ibn al-'Arabi are very famous and often quoted. They clearly express the Sufi doctrine that all ways, and all spiritual experiences in particular, are the same in their essences and lead to the One God. He says in one of his poems:

My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,  
And a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Ka'ba and the tables of the Tora and the book of the Koran.  
I follow the religion of love: whatever my Love's camels take, that is my religion and my faith.<sup>79</sup>

An inter-faith vision to some extent form an integral part of Yunus Emre's Sufism and religious experience, too. In one of his poems, he writes this:

With Jesus in the sky,  
Moses on Mount Sinai,  
Raising my sceptre high,  
I call you out, my God.<sup>80</sup>

His poems frequently refer to his full acceptance of the "four holy books" rather than a strict adherence to the Qur'an, and occasionally invoke pre-Islamic religious names. For example, he writes this:

I am Job: I have found all this patience;  
I am St. George: I died a thousand times.<sup>81</sup>

He was content to utilise the available corpus of mystic thought and literature which had followed a long line of evaluation with elements of Buddhist, Indian, Manichean mysticism, the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus, Christian mystic sects, the Jewish Kabbalah, as well as Muslim mystics and thinkers.<sup>82</sup> In an age when hostilities, rifts, and destruction were rampant, Yunus Emre was able to give expression to an all-embracing love of humanity and to his concepts of universal brotherhood which transcended all schisms and sects:

For those who truly love God and his ways  
All the people of the world are brothers.<sup>83</sup>

Mawlana Jalal al-Din al-Rumi had close personal relationship with the monks of his time from Konya, or Istanbul. He would visit the Eflatun (Plato) Monastery situated near the city of Konya to talk with the monks there, who held him in the greatest esteem, and acknowledged his wisdom. One day one of the monks passed him in the street in Konya and bowed his head in greeting. Mawlana returned him a yet deeper bow and the two conversed for a while before going their separate ways. When the monk was out of sight Mawlana said to those with him,

Praise be to God, I have exceeded a monk in humility.<sup>84</sup>

There are many other such stories told about Mawlana and the monks. For him nothing was of more importance than people of faith and belief. He also believed that the religious experience of pious persons or mystics of all religions is the same; because both its source is the same and its goal is the same. The differences among the religions should not be exaggerated and, if possible, should be forgotten.

At the end of the paper, it might possibly be argued that as Yunus Emre predicted what Molla Kasım would do in the future and warned him in a poem, so Mawlana addresses and gives advice to the people of different faiths like us in here, in a beautiful *ghazel* as follows:

Blow the horn of unity and let us all gather together, and join as one.  
Let us forget our differences, if only for a moment.  
If we are carried away beyond ourselves, we will become the colour of water.  
We are all the branches of a single tree, all fellow travellers.<sup>85</sup>

## NOTES

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