

Sufism is not Mysticism

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Spahic Omer

Kulliyyah of Architecture and Environmental Design
International Islamic University Malaysia

E-mail: spahico@yahoo.com

There are two types of Sufism: authentic and pseudo, or theosophical, Sufism. Authentic Sufism is a product of Islam alone and is nothing else but the quintessence of orthodox Islam. Pseudo, or theosophical, Sufism, on the other hand, is an abominable innovation which was influenced by alien-to-Islam worldviews and traditions.

One of the widely articulated misconceptions about Sufism is that it is identifiable with mysticism. Moreover, to some people, Sufism is also similar, albeit not completely identical, to the notions of monasticism, a lifestyle that involves the renouncing of worldly interests for the sake of devoting one's self to the pursuing of religious goals, and excessive asceticism, a lifestyle characterized by abstinence from various worldly pleasures also for the sake of devoting one's self to the pursuing of certain spiritual goals.

Authentic Sufism is a product of Allah's final revelation given to the seal of prophets, Muhammad (pbuh). It is thus exclusively an Islamic phenomenon. Mysticism, on the other hand, preceded the existence of Sufism by centuries and even millennia, and its various forms and expressions could be traced back to almost every religious as well as philosophical tradition known to man. Those traditions signify either

distorted versions of once Allah's revealed messages to mankind through various prophets who preceded the prophetic mission of Muhammad (pbuh), or are philosophical and religious legacies generated by man in the complete absence of the former. Mysticism is thus a universal, fluid and open-ended, so to speak, phenomenon whose conceptual and procedural parameters border on indefinite. By and large, it is associated with religions, ideologies and philosophies where the ultimate truth is yet to be fully established and put into practice. It follows that mysticism, in point of fact, is a desperate seeking of that full truth, where some desperate and unconventional means and ways are undertaken in the process, rather than being any reliable and true knowledge and experience of, and communion with, the ultimate divine Reality. Mysticism is an infinite quest, an endless journey. By no means is it realizing a projected vision, or arriving at a coveted destination, or a station. Mysticism is a venture into the unknown, most of the time at the initiative of a mystic himself. It is a self-initiation within the soul towards some fairly distorted and ambiguous goals wrapped up in the cliché of enlightenment and Divinity-seeking. It is a one-way passage, the results of which a mystic can never predict and which can take him by surprise. It is a spiritual adventure which, admittedly, can give its adventurers some genuinely blissful, albeit transient, moments. Nonetheless, it also can turn seriously disappointing and hollow. More often than not, however, mysticism is a mode of constant wandering from one spiritual uncertainty and deficiency to another, from one dubious mystery to another. It is an endless and open-ended most sophisticated display of people's spiritual qualms, anxieties and vagueness.

Although a mystical system could stem from a particular religious or philosophical thought, its spontaneously absolute appeal, passion and aspirations in the end transcend the latter's often hardened, monolithic, absolutist and obscurantist principles and ritual ceremonies. A mystical system thus could be called "Christian", "Jewish",

"Buddhist", "Hindu", etc., but once a mystic adopts a comprehensive esoteric method and strategy, and as a result rises above the confines of worldly existence where even his religious affiliation which was dominated by clergy, formal hierarchies and mandated sacred texts and creeds belongs, making a way into a spiritual kingdom and trying to attain a conscious awareness, intuition and experience of, and even communion with, an ultimate and supreme transcendent Being -- a mystic's initial identity then becomes as good as lost. He becomes just one of many fervent truth and God-seekers, in the sense that he joins a multitude of spiritually charged persons who crave to connect to that Being within, and through this connection to become the recipient of divine wisdom, love, and compassion.

It stands to reason that mysticism, by definition, is one community whose paths differ in form but not in essence and goals. It denotes attaining direct knowledge of God through subjective experiences, as well as attaining mystical union or direct communion with God. In other words, mysticism is the seeking of that perennial truth whose completeness and unity, however, have always been eluding man in domains of both religion and philosophy. What mystics were doing thousands of years ago, as a matter of fact, still do today. The search still goes on, so much so that mystics readily display in the process a propensity to defy their religious institutional structures, including formal hierarchies and authorized sacred scriptures and dogmas for the purpose. It seems that the historical, geographical and cultural omnipresence of mystics and their diverse-yet-unified mystical thought had some bearing on the subsequent birth of what came to be known as perennial philosophy.

It could be safely said, therefore, that a Christian mystic, for example, is firstly a mystic, then a Christian. The same holds true with reference to Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, etc. mystics. Mystics, in certain ways, are spiritual rebels. They are inclined to skepticism and doubting,

pushing the limits of theirs and other people's spirituality. However, neither do they admit it nor give sufficient evidence to their detractors so that the latter could convict them of any, especially spiritual, felony. Finding it both insufficient and unconvincing, a mystic might revolt against what his religious order is able to serve to him. A mystic's avid pursuit of a higher and deeper order of things where one allegedly forms an internal union with God, renders only that particular mission a supreme and absolute one; everything else, including a mystic's past professed religious conditions, is deemed relative and of less importance. The former condition affects and dictates the latter; it should never be the other way round, that is, that the exoteric ritualistic formalism should hold sway over a mystic's pursuit of identity with the Divinity through direct experiences or insights, while evolving practices intended to nurture those experiences. Some mystics, expectedly, even ended up regarding the physical religious laws and rituals as completely superfluous. What they possessed of gnosis (spiritual knowledge in the sense of mystical enlightenment) and enlightening mystical experiences, visions and states of consciousness, was a complete and foremost condition beyond ordinary levels of being and normal human perception. Certainly, this was one of the reasons why many critics often viewed mysticism as a dangerous and controversial enterprise, knowing that it could lead to blasphemy, and was occasionally a cause of schism inside various religious communities.

Besides, many mystics, especially those who in their spiritual adventures and quest for enlightenment and gnosis made recourse to philosophy, were not only rejected but also were somewhat regarded as naïve fantasists because where reason proved powerless they gave way to feelings and imagination.

If truth be told, a potential mystic is torn between demands to quench his intense natural thirst and disposition (*fitrah*) for incessantly worshipping his Creator and Lord, which has been implanted in every

human being as part of God's plan for His creation, and between the verity that the fullness of the absolute truth was not always readily available, or easily accessible, in a mystic's own life and in the lives of others. For one reason or another, a world of impediments or uncertainties could stand between a seeker of utter and absolute truth and that truth itself. Although God, the only source of the only truth, ensured that all nations, tribes and communities had prophets, warners and guides, yet constantly throughout history it was the practice of a majority of people to go up against and dispense with their prophet's teachings, or to tamper with and significantly change them, or to simply ignore, or take them lightly, eventually forgetting them. It was always that relative shallow personal and communities' interests and aims took precedence over the absolute interests and aims of the absolute truth. As a result, numerous prophets were succeeding each other in order to revive the extinguished or completely distorted truth, only for the same to be turned off, obscured or warped again after they had gone. As the time was passing, however, conditions were ripening and a momentum was gradually building up for the final messenger and prophet of God, Muhammad (pbuh), to come and, while authenticating earlier prophets and their divine messages, invite the whole of mankind to the final mode or version of the total and only truth. But that truth God has promised that He Himself will guard against those unfortunate fates that were befalling earlier prophets and their revealed messages. It was a time for the truth to start shining in its full glow once and for all, and for falsehood to be irrevocably eclipsed and utterly rescinded.

It goes without saying that the truth is only one, and so is God its source. Islam is the truth which God made man's permanent companion on the earth as soon as he was sent to it, on account of that truth being meant for him. Islam propagates the unity and oneness of God, of the truth, and of the meaning, purpose and providence of life and man. It likewise endorses diversity of approaches, means and modi operandi for conveying and putting into operation the truth and its life systems

as warranted and necessitated by the huge scale of time and space factors diversity. The ultimate revealed truth which was man's companion from Adam, the first man and prophet on earth, to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), the seal of prophets, echoes the disposition of the heavenly paradigm from which it emanated. This everlasting unity of prophethoods and Islam's faith, God emphasizes time and again in the Qur'an, affirming, for example, that "We did not send before you any messenger but We revealed to him that there is no god but Me, therefore serve Me" (al-Anbiya', 25).

So, therefore, unlike most forms of mysticism where a mystic basically alone undertakes a spiritual journey seeking the Divinity and the supreme and transcendent Being, while evolving certain practices intended to sustain him on his journey and to nurture his newly acquired experiences, in Islam, on the other hand, God reveals Himself, His Will, Word and Providence, to man. God "comes" to man, so to speak, inviting him to undertake a clearly projected and mapped spiritual journey of his own, with clearly marked benchmarks, stations and conditions, towards a spiritual summit where a solid relationship between a true believer and God based on mutual love, is then formed. As a result of such a spiritual relationship, or a meeting, and even a "union", a guided believer's will, thinking and performance paradigms become in total agreement with Allah's Will and Word. That is to say, a believer's total being submits itself in servitude to Allah, relentlessly worshipping Him in his words, deeds and thoughts, and selflessly serving the interests of the truth alone, even if that be at the expense of his own personal whims and interests. Unlike most forms of mysticism where a mystic pursues and tries to experience the absolute truth in a basically one-way traffic relationship, authentic Sufism, conversely, signifies that a believer favorably responds to the spiritual calls, "advances" and "drawing near" of the truth by making his own initiatives, "advances" and "drawing near", so that a spiritual meeting and a "union" between the two is ensured and expedited. Definitely,

this "advancing" of the truth and believers, and their "drawing near" towards each other in Islam, as well as their eventual unification representative of a single will, purpose and objective, ought always to be a starting point for studying the Sufism phenomenon - and the truth of Islam in general -- and its fundamental differences with the religious and philosophical mysticism phenomenon.

Mysticism originally entailed such concepts as "mysteries", "secrets", "secret cults" and "vague speculations and beliefs". However, later when Christianity embarked on integrating certain Greek traditions and beliefs into its own corpus of doctrines and religious ceremonies -- including the technical vocabulary of the Hellenistic mysteries -- imbuing them with its own typical spiritual character and identity, the term "mysticism" became virtually a Christian identification. Hence, the modern usage of the word has to do with the history of the Christian tradition more than with any other religious tradition.

Mysticism, by definition, has no - or at best, has extremely little -- place in Islam because in Islam there is no room for mysteries, myths and legends that often defy human intelligence, or for secretive aspects of the fundamental truth which can be attained only by a few and due to some special and supranormal means and ways. Likewise, there is no such thing as supernatural holy men, gurus or saints who only can achieve a state of perfect enlightenment and piety, monopolizing then the truth and the mysterious channels, ways and techniques with which the former can be achieved. In Islam, furthermore, there is nothing simpler, plainer and clearer than the truth. What is more, there is no better secret to a happy and meaningful life than sheer simplicity, sincerity, transparency and honesty, with others and, more importantly, with one's own self. There is nothing that symbolizes these notions better than the notion of light, just as there is nothing that symbolizes the opposites better than the notion of darkness. Surely, the life of a true believer is a

simple, straightforward and a clearly defined affair, from the beginning till the end. Minimalism in form and appearances, and profundity, wisdom and luminosity in substance, meaning and purpose, it stands to reason, are synonymous with the lifestyle of a believer. A true believer, furthermore, has nothing to hide, camouflage, mystify or veil when it comes to his relationships with his Creator and with his very self and his consciousness. There is nothing in his life that is susceptible to hesitation, skepticism, superstitions, mysteries and unnecessary fears. In contrast, he is very confident of, and happy about, what and who he is, and what he normally does. He does not hesitate even for a moment to exhibit to his self, his intellect, and to the spiritual forces of existence, the truths about himself and about his life undertakings.

Thus, the notion of light (*nur*) is very important in Islam. Allah has likened Himself to light in a Qur'anic chapter called *al-Nur*, which means *Light*. In it, Allah declares that He is the Light of the heavens and the earth (*al-Nur* 35). A parable of His light is then presented in a breathtaking style. The Qur'an also identifies divine revelations with *nur* or light which helps people to walk and persevere on the right path. Accordingly, the main job of prophets was to guide people from darkness to light (*al-Ma'idah*, 15, 44). The term *nur* in the Qur'an is used to express physical, moral and spiritual vision.⁽¹⁾ The job of Satan, on the other hand, is to deceive people and (mis)lead them from light to darkness (*al-Baqarah*, 257). The whole of existence on earth is thus a struggle for supremacy between the forces of good and evil, truth and falsehood, enlightenment and ignorance, civilization and backwardness, vision and blindness, light and darkness.

It was exactly because of this that when prophet Musa (Moses) was asked to make an appointment between himself and Pharaoh's magicians

⁽¹⁾ Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi, *Islam and Architecture*, in "*Fine Arts in Islamic Civilization*", edited by M.A.J. Beg, (Kuala Lumpur: The University of Malaya Press, 1981), p. 109.

for a duel between the truth and falsehood, he chose a day of "the Festival" demanding that all the people gather in the early forenoon (Ta Ha, 59). Prophet Musa thus wanted everyone to be present as a witness to the triumph of the truth, and to do so in the early forenoon when the light of the day is at its brightest, and when the faculties and minds of the people are sharpest and most perceptive, so that the truth could be unmistakably witnessed by all and could be accepted by whosoever willed to do so of his or her own accord.

Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi elaborated on this: "Islam abhors darkness. It has no mysteries, no secrets and tolerates no paradoxes or ambiguities. Its aim is always perfect clarity, perfect vision, perfect obviousness and distinctness. It has never used or accepted the symbolism of the womb. Its revelation was not something born in darkness, shrouded in mystery, beset with ambiguity. The Prophet often received the revelations in presence of the public. Its advent never required or accompanied the slightest lapse of consciousness. On the contrary, the Prophet's consciousness was always tauter and clearer under the impact of revelation. That is why Islam never entertained or tolerated any dilation of consciousness, any drunkenness, any psychotropia as having anything to do with the vision of the Holy, with religious experience."⁽²⁾

About the Author:

Dr. Spahic Omer, a Bosnian currently residing in Malaysia, is an Associate Professor at the Kulliyah of Architecture and Environmental Design, International Islamic University Malaysia. He studied in Bosnia, Egypt and Malaysia. His research interests cover Islamic history, culture and civilization, as well as the history and

⁽²⁾ Ibid., p. 109-110.

philosophy of Islamic built environment. He can be reached at spahico@yahoo.com; his blog is at www.medinanet.org.