

In Search of a True Ecstasy

Spahic Omer

Almighty Allah as the Creator of man reveals in His Qur'an that upon creating and proportioning man He breathed into him of His spirit (the soul) (al-Hijr, 29).

This is likewise referred to as bringing man forth as another creation (al-Mu'minun, 14) – in addition to matter.

The Qur'an also mentions the covenant between Allah and the sons of Adam (entire mankind) prior to their physical creation and their arrival in this world (al-A'raf, 172).

Such was the purpose of the covenant that it cannot be erased from the human memory. No person forgets it regardless of life's circumstances and people's conscious choices.

The majority of scholars interpret the covenant as the *fitrah*, or the sound human nature, which has been implanted inside all human beings. It drives them to search for the Creator and to believe in Him.

It furthermore causes them to long for and love Him, and finally to submit to His will and to serve Him.

The *fitrah* is accepted as the human natural inclination, inborn innocence, purity and goodness, hereditary weaknesses, dependency and religiosity, and the restless perennial quest for a higher order of meaning and experience.

These feelings are universal, expressing themselves differently and with different degrees of intensity, subject to people's overall aptitudes, gifts and, most importantly, religious affiliations.

People's lives are dictated by the terms of their humanness - consciously or otherwise. Yet, people are slaves of their nature and its instinctive proclivities.

Neither can they ignore them, nor transcend their bounds. Whatever they do is either a response to, or a step to satiating, their urges.

Epiphanies and ecstasies

Epiphanies are celebrated as unrivalled moments of truth and enlightenment, and as sudden revelations that grace an individual, a community and even the whole world.

However, as splendid and exuberant as they may be, such moments and experiences are but flashes of the otherworldliness of human nature.

They erupt when both known and unknown conditions are right, when people tirelessly work, expect and hope for them, and whenever they simply want to erupt, often when least expected.

Ecstasies or raptures, on the other hand, are moments of intensified mental and spiritual awareness.

They are normally seen as altered and advanced states of consciousness, which make a person oblivious to the fetters of this material and fleeting world.

However, they are rare and temporary instants, sometimes as rapid as a twinkling. They signify a condition whereby a person's incorporeal and spiritual dimensions take over his being.

They can be in relation to love, beauty, benevolence, sagacity, fulfilment, virtue and the truth. They can be in connection with people, things, ideas and values.

In other words, only in such provinces as serve as gateways to Heaven can true ecstasies be generated.

They produce exceptional experiences of elation and happiness. They are personal and innermost, instead of being collective and exceptionally outward.

They cannot be expressed by words, or any other physical media, because a metaphysical component cannot be articulated by a physical one. Only approximate metaphors can be used.

They are inwardly experienced and cherished however a person so desires and is able to.

As heavenly gifts, ecstasies are common in all human beings. They cannot be bought, simulated, or manipulated. They are not solely religious, nor "professionalized", occasions.

Needless to say, nonetheless, that the closer a person is to the spiritual spheres - and to himself -, the more often and the more intensely he possesses such feelings.

That is what is generally understood as ultimate human joy, happiness and pleasure. All other forms of joy, happiness and pleasure are subjected to the former.

People live for such moments and experiences. That is also what keeps them going. The universes of dreams (hopes) and memories are built but on the premises of those moments and experiences.

Indeed, life is a succession of extraordinary memories held together by as many extraordinary emotions. The remainder is quickly cast aside and easily forgotten.

For example, a lifespan of seventy years, in essence, is just a small memoir of authentic recollections imbued with enduring and as authentic feelings.

They are consigned to the deepest recesses of the soul, which a person keeps frequenting. His visits keep increasing as the recollections grow and the prospect of making new ones diminishes.

Torn between ecstasies, matter and transience

In this there is an element of tragedy as well. Not even most intensely spiritual persons can capture and fully experience ecstasies in this world, let alone such as have turned their backs on spirituality and Heaven.

Spiritual persons who embrace and live the truth know that the most genuine, most complete, everlasting and heavenly ecstasy (bliss) can take place only in the Hereafter, in Jannah (Paradise).

This world's flashes of although-worldly-yet-otherworldly-quality-wise ecstasy are no more than reminders of and a stepping stone to the former. They in addition function as its irrefutable evidence and sign. They attract each other.

On the other hand, non-spiritual persons, who are trapped in matter, persist in trying the impossible: to satiate their inner cravings for the ontological ecstasy, albeit within the wrong framework and by wrong means.

It goes without saying that the results of such an approach are at best partial, erratic and unreliable. Instead of driving a person forward, their one-dimensionality holds him back. The results are often fake and deceptive.

People as a consequence appear torn between the pressure of the innate demands for actual ecstasy, and the painful reality of transient matter inside which they have imprisoned themselves.

It is a war of attrition involving demands for the real and absolute, and supplies of the superficial and relative substance.

Either way, life is a chase. It is a mission fraught with a mixture of hopes, expectations, victories, celebrations, failures and disappointments.

Capturing the moment (catching the wave)

Life is like a river. It constantly flows. As if there is no present. There is only the uncertain future and the beckoning past.

The present is that fine, yet virtual, frontier that stands between the two realms. It denotes their confluence. No sooner does a person start thinking about the present, than it becomes part of the past with the rays of the future starting to show up.

Such is the dynamics of life. Its subtleties are overwhelming and beyond anything man can offer.

If people could only capture that fine frontier and flow with it, especially insofar as creating and experiencing ecstasies are concerned.

That is impossible though. People can only dream and look forward to such thing in the Hereafter. Some tend to resort to theorizing about and inventing utopias as an alternative.

That condition is mankind's weakest spot. Hence, Satan was able to deceive Adam and his wife in the Garden of Eden while promising them eternity, perfection and infinite authority.

One cannot flow with the river of life because it is the rule that life flows through people. The only option left is that people grow vertically more experienced, wiser and ever closer to the realizing of their existential purpose.

Be that as it may, there are still certain individuals who are granted special abilities and flairs. They can do what others cannot and can only dream about.

They are in a position to arrest glimpses of those exceptional blissful moments. They can somewhat freeze them, so to speak, and translate them - for instance - in a poem, a musical composition, a literary work, a painting, an idea, a solution, an architectural design, a

decorative pattern, or in any other remarkable acts that evoke the perfection, splendour, beauty, unity, peace, equilibrium and profundity of the truth and Heaven.

If beauty is the splendour of the truth (as said by Plato), then ecstasies are windows into the realm of its secrets.

It is self-evident that the geniuses and talents who believe in and follow the truth are not like their counterparts who do not do so. The latter's outputs are deficient, subjective and superficial. They can yet be misleading and dangerous, owing to the importance and sensitivity of their works.

Divested of the revealed knowledge and guidance, they can lead merely to the threshold of the truth and perfection.

At any rate, all geniuses and talents are gifts to mankind, one way or another. If one truly wants, one can learn from all of them. One can learn much about the truth from the unfolding of the falsehood as well. All earthly events, phenomena and experiences contain signs.

Thus, such people are extremely important, very much loved and esteemed in their societies. Let's just recall what Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Vincent van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Mozart, Beethoven, Shakespeare, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, Newton, Einstein, and many others in different fields, mean to the West and its civilization.

They are all heroes, yet idols, and their works inspirational masterpieces, which are invaluable. Their works testify to the flashes of elated brilliance, which have been captured and preserved, and as such, passed down to posterity to everlastingly delight in and benefit from them.

They are furthermore "prophets" of Western civilization and their works "revelations". All other works and civilizational contributions revolve around theirs.

The Islamic concepts of *sakinah* and *itmi'nan*

By virtue of being the true religion and the true system of life and thought, Islam expands the notion of ecstasy to higher levels.

Acknowledging people's both desire and need to experience ecstasy, Islam offers its solution.

According to it, the true, total and eternal ecstasy (pleasure and bliss) is available only in the Hereafter.

As far as this world is concerned, people are presented with certain opportunities, which however they must not perceive as ends, but rather as means and paths to the Hereafter. Patience is the key.

The Qur'an calls the relevant spiritual and mental states as *sakinah* and *itmi'nan*. They are the true forms of "Islamic ecstasy" in this world.

Sakinah is mentioned six times in the Qur'an and generally means "special tranquillity, serenity, peace, reassurance, confidence and calmness".

It is a particular state of soul and mind – yet the whole being – which believers constantly seek from Allah through their faith and acts of devotion.

The Qur'an in all but one of those six instances precedes the word *sakinah* with the verb *anzala* which means "to send down".

That implies that believers know exactly what they do and where exactly they aim. As a result, Allah sends down *sakinah* into their hearts, and upon their complete beings, at once as a reward for their past dedication, and as an incentive for the future to persevere and eventually secure the big prize in Jannah.

Allah does not cast, nor simply place, *sakinah* into the hearts of believers. He sends it down as though to meet the advancing piety and zeal of people.

This is a sign of a special relationship between Allah and His faithful servants.

Allah's continuous appreciation and giving, and the latter's continuous productivity and beseeching, converge on a heavenly plinth buoyed by the incalculable value of faith, love and munificence.

Such results in a coveted communion which is the source of all bona fide ecstasies.

A believer's life is an upward journey towards self-actualization and self-perfection in this world, and towards Jannah in the Hereafter. Its milestones are elements and degrees of *sakinah* as ecstasy which Allah frequently sends down upon him. They as much reward as energize him in his pursuits.

To some commentators of the Qur'an, sending down *sakinah* also means "sending down angels" to help and facilitate believers' lives. It may even be perceived as Allah's direct favourable interventions.

Moreover, *itmi'nan* means almost the same thing. Abdullah b. 'Abbas said that every *sakinah* in the Qur'an is *tama'ninah* (*itmi'nan*), except in *surah* (chapter) *al-Baqarah*, verse 248, where *sakinah* in the context of the Children of Israel for some specific reasons implies something else.

The concept of *itmi'nan* is mentioned thirteen times in the Qur'an in three differently derived forms.

It means "assurance, satisfaction, rest, tranquillity, contentment, happiness and security".

It is on account of this that the Qur'an describes a person who succeeded in this world and moves to the Hereafter (through the doorway of death) to collect his ultimate prize, as "the serene and reassured soul" (al-Fajr, 27).

That is the culmination of such a person's quest for, and experience of, the authentic ecstasy and pleasure of this world, using it as a prelude to the same but within the divine framework of the Hereafter.

As an example of finding *itmi'nan* as "Islamic ecstasy", the Qur'an says: "Those who have believed and whose hearts are assured (found rest and satisfaction) by the remembrance of Allah. Unquestionably, by the remembrance of Allah hearts are assured (find rest and satisfaction)" (al-Ra'd, 28).

As another example using the word *sakinah*, the Qur'an says: "Then Allah sent down His tranquillity (calmness, reassurance and confidence) upon His Messenger and upon the believers

and sent down soldiers angels whom you did not see and punished those who disbelieved. And that is the recompense of the disbelievers” (al-Tawbah, 26).

All genres of believers’ creative and progressive thinking – and doing - are unique. They connote an extension, as well as reflection, of their unique spiritual state. That which is inside lives outside too.

Ecstasies, therefore, are not just altered, but also genuinely enlightened and improved, states of consciousness. They are natural, coveted and real. They are chiefly spiritual, then emotional and intellectual, experiences.

Finally, it must be stressed that just as irreligious art, architecture, literature, music, songs, poetry, fashion, eloquence, pleasure-seeking and various Western and Eastern religious mystical and magical procedures are not the avenues to ultimate and legitimate ecstasy, the various theories of pseudo-Sufism are not either.

What typically transpires therein is hypocritical, artificial and ostentatious. There is virtually nothing Islamic about it.