

Introduction

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This book tries to explore mystical traditions, particularly Sufism, as forms of resilience against religious violence. Without denying the tragic reality of the latter, nor even seeds of virtual ‘intolerance’ in the former, it attempts to find out how mystical thinkers struggled with particularism (‘only our creed contains the truth’) and sometimes overcame it. True, it would be a sign of an altogether ahistorical approach to project the contemporary democratic ideal of ‘tolerance’ on medieval traditions. It would ignore the *current* condition of the modern state, product of the Enlightenment, and the existence of global, politically warranted relations of trust between states. This condition has given a particular urgency to what is called ‘tolerance’ today. Being blind to the dire need of *allowing* for religious diversity in a globalising world – which is not identical to *embracing* it – does not strengthen ‘tolerance’ as a *moral* or even *metaphysical* value. Therefore, it could be helpful at this point to turn to mystical traditions, which minimised the weight of dogmatic content in favour of an inner experience of God – whose essence cannot be captured. It could unmask contemporary tolerance ideals as merely pragmatic, and as imposed by a complex reality of religious pluralism.

For better or for worse, Sufi thinkers, kabbalists, Daoists or Hindu mystics focused on the limitations of the human mind to comprehend God. Realising these limitations turned out to become an explosive issue for clerics who pretended to be the guardians of religious truths. Insisting on the restrictions of the human mind would deprive them of power, and perhaps even reveal their anxiety for being ultimately empty-handed – an anxiety which is, in fact, all too human. It would show that ‘revelation’ is not an outward, ‘possessive’, but an inward, ‘unsettling’ category. Whether or not one sees *Spinoza* as a mystic, he was at least one of the first to reinterpret the category of ‘revelation’ and to undo it of its outward, ‘fetishistic’ character; ‘revelation’, Spinoza argued, is a veridic form of human knowledge, *albeit* one that is equal to ‘imagination’,

which is only the third, lowest form of human knowledge. Rational knowledge, and even more, immediate insight, will always surpass 'revealed' knowledge in terms of reliability.

Similarly, in Rumi's Sufi perspective, human beings possess only a parochial intellect, which is not sufficient to get into perfect cognitive knowledge. Revelation, the light of the universal intellect, mediates the attainment of universal knowledge. That being said, rational knowledge, which is a certain form of intellectuality, is itself a God-given faculty, hence must always be enlightened by the universal intellect, that is, revelation. This Sufi perspective reveals another aspect to the nature of revelation, which has perhaps not been acknowledged by Spinoza. Beyond the value of revelation for the attainment of a perfect understanding, it is, indeed, a pathway showing the true direction in life, as the prophets or saints have portrayed its face.

The Sufi's book is not writ in words and ink
 It is nothing but a heart white as snow
 The scholar's work through words he writes is known;
 By footprints is the Sufi's method shown.
 Like hunters he has hunted game instead;
 He saw deer tracks and followed where they led.
 For several steps, on tracks he has relied,
 But now the scent of musk serves as his guide.
 When he gives thanks for tracks, completes the way,
 Of course through them he'll reach his goal one day;
 To rise a stage by scent earns more for you
 Than tracks or circumambulation do!

(Rumi, *The Masnavi: Book Two*, vv. 160-66)

A study of mystical traditions in an age of religious violence is of paramount importance, for several reasons at least. One reason has already been mentioned. The tolerant outlook of mystical traditions could put prevailing conceptions of 'tolerance' today into a wider perspective; it might remind us that a 'tolerance' which merely turns need into a virtue – as it often does today – is not necessarily the best form. Rather, tolerance goes beyond the utilitarian use of it and reveals itself associated with compassion and love, as Rumi eloquently puts it:

Listen with ears of tolerance! See through the eyes of compassion!
 And, speak with the language of love.

The three together best reveal the importance of the mystical view of tolerance. This means that a mystic is a symbol of a lover who has been intoxicated by the wine of mystical love on a journey to rest in the arms of the Beloved. In Rumi's Sufism, tolerance and compassion are shadowed by the mystical love of the Beloved. In this perception, all other faith traditions are tolerated; their believers are loved compassionately because they all have stepped on the mystical path toward the same Beloved. This centrality of love accords a universal characteristic to the mystical view of tolerance. They all tolerate each other because they all love the same Beloved, but from different angles, as Rumi puts it.

Not Christian or Jew or Muslim, not Hindu
Buddhist, Sufi, or Zen. Not any religion

or cultural system. I am not from the East
or the West, not out of the ocean or up

from the ground, not natural or ethereal, not
composed of elements at all. I do not exist,

am not an entity in this world or in the next,
did not descend from Adam and Eve or any

origin story. My place is placeless, a trace
of the traceless. Neither body or soul.

I belong to the beloved, have seen the two
worlds as one and that one call to and know,

first, last, outer, inner, only that
breath breathing human being.

Next, mystical traditions represent the flexible underbelly of religions. In proportion to their weakened 'subjectivism' (*I believe, think, confirm, testify, etc.*) they seem to make room for *experience* and *otherness*, beyond the confines of a self-contained or self-assured ego. It might well be that the more emphasis is put on a *subject* of faith, the less this subject is open to that faith itself. Could it be that the Cartesian *ego cogito* has negatively affected many religious self-conceptions, to the extent that, while 'thinking' (*cogitare*) has been substituted for 'believing', 'stating', or 'testifying', the *ego* has remained and usurped a place which blocks openness, not only to other religions but equally to one's own?

This *ego cogito*, the depraved “I” which is confined to its ego, only manifests a shadow state of being entrapping the soul in the worldly limitations while ignoring or eventually excluding, and more particularly stifling, one’s eagerness for a deeper discovery of itself, and admittedly of others. Human beings, tempted by the temptation of egoism, or *amour propre*, and being disengaged from an organised whole of humanity, are stuck there, struggling and striving only for their ego illusion, while ignoring the richness of their human soul, either individually or in a group. That is why in mystical traditions, this ego is like a veil which blinds the inner eye to discover the way toward the Beloved. That is why the intoxicated Sufi always strives for abandoning the *ego cogito*, the *amour propre*, or, in the language of Rumi, for putting aside self-will. Just leave yourself: “When you do things from your soul, you feel a river moving in you, a joy”.

This would bring us to a third reason why a study of mystical traditions in an age of religious violence imposes itself. It could deepen the religious traditions themselves, by questioning, not necessarily their rough, outer, historical or moral truths, but rather the mental *act* which upholds those truths. Does not an impure mind damage the religious position it defends? Would not pronouncing the Islamic *shahada* or the Jewish *shema* with a mendacious spirit destroy the content of what is professed? Religious confessions and professions do not presuppose perfect believers (for that would be aiming too high), but they seem to presuppose at least the *intention* to purify oneself *while* professing one’s faith. Rumi qualifies the intention to purify oneself as a state of wonder, when a true believer empties himself like a lute “to make the sweet music of *Lord, Lord*”. The *shahada*, or the *shema*, is more than the verbal attestation of God. It must reveal the secret of this music. “There is nothing more subtle and delightful than to make that music”. By contemplating the beauty of making music, beyond the verbal testimony of the *Lord*, mystics show how one could strive for intimacy with the Beloved. On this road, amazed by the glory of the Beloved, the mystic receives a sense of loveliness that surpasses all aspects of the exoteric view of religion. Exploring these aspects of the religious tradition, Sufis argue that God does not look at your outer appearance, but at the love within your love. Rumi says:

Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.

A fourth reason why mystical study would be helpful is that it enables the student to put one’s own belief system into a broader perspective. Not only is

the term 'mystical' (or any equivalent) fully absent in Asian spiritual traditions (many of which simply incorporated and generalised what is called 'mystical' rather than leaving it to religious specialists alone); it even seems to be dispensable to those *monotheists* who represent 'mystical' ideas: Eckhart, Angelus Silesius, Abulafia, Rumi, Ibn 'Arabi, etc. 'Mystical' largely became a technical term used by scholastic thinkers, such as Thomas Aquinas, who made a distinction between diverse theological methodologies, mystical and non-mystical. For Dionysius the Areopagite (480-530 AD), who coined the term 'mystical' for Christian thinking, it represented the methodology logically consequent upon the previous stages of 'positive' and 'negative' theology. In Judaism, *qabalah* means 'tradition'; the majority of the *mequbelim* intended to unearth verities that they believed to be hidden in the revealed Biblical text. In Islamic mysticism, Sufism is more than purification of the soul for the experiential proximity with God. Sufism neither connotes the life of those who don a woollen robe as a symbol of penitence and/or humiliation. Nor are Sufis only self-restrictive or ascetic. Rather, they are those who, the same as the *mequbelim*, and the same as Christian mystics, look for unveiling the inner aspects of the faith.

Could it be that putting 'mysticism' *aside* from the 'regular' religious tradition serves a political goal? Might it be that religious or political authorities have an *interest* in minimising the weight of mystical dimensions in the main religions, as these dimensions could theoretically discredit *any* human power system, both ancient and modern, both spiritual and secular?

If true, then studying mystical traditions today might have a double advantage. Not only would it serve as an antidote against contemporary religious violence, unmasking it as a ridiculous human usurpation of divine truth. It would perhaps even go farther and attack the powers that be themselves; to the extent, that is, that these powers, whether religious or political, hold ultimate truth claims. Not only dictators or absolute religious leaders (which is obvious) but even convinced democrats and proceduralists could theoretically prove this indictment to be justified. Should not, so the study of mystical traditions could teach each human viewpoint – even the most democratic – be tainted by 'provisionality'? Is not the democratic position, to the extent that it is a *human* position, liable to the same usurpatory features as the dictatorship shamelessly displays?

The thematic order of the book includes the following two parts.

The first part is entitled *The Genesis of Islamic Mysticism as a Counterforce against Religious Terrorism*. In this part, the message of love and acknowledgement of a plurality of pathways to God, the Supreme Reality will be outlined, regardless of differences in the belief system. Spiritual traditions which root in the Abrahamic faith and which contribute to global ethics will be explored. Without disregarding concomitant forms of mystical asceticism and Gnosticism, a greater emphasis will be put on the potentials in mystical traditions to criticise violence and terror adequately. Authors who contribute to this part will argue that mystics, passionate lovers of God, who strive to reunite with the Beloved, are most reluctant to deny the right of other beliefs. Rather, these mystics develop partisanship of knowledge and love against hateful language, violence, and terrorising. The road to union with the Beloved, they claim, passes through a constant attempt for refinement of the soul, but more importantly, it entails a duty to denounce religious zealotry and dogmatism.

The second part, labelled *An Insider-Outsider Dialogue: in Support of Sufism against Terrorism*, opens a dialogue with non-Islamic mysticism to get support in the battle against religious terrorism. In this part, the main idea to be explored is that mystics of Judeo-Christianity, as well as Eastern and Indigenous forms of mysticism, could, and are open to advise and share their mystical resources with Muslim mystics. Central is the common ground in mystical traditions against hate, denial of different others, and the act of terrorising.

We posit that this innovative publishing project would be attractive to both the public and anti-terrorism experts. By its mission, this book carries an instrumental educational value since it addresses an unexplored dimension of the global campaign against terrorism. The title could also have its addressee in academia as well as in those engaged in consultancy work against terrorism.