

Classical Sufi Approaches to Scripture

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Historians of religion often equate scripture in Islam solely with the Qur'ān. But if scripture is understood to include those texts for which a claim of divine inspiration is made by the Muslim community, other bodies of Islamic religious literature must be included. Scripture in Islam encompasses the Qur'ān, which is understood by Muslims to be God's actual word transmitted through Muhammad; the divinely inspired Hadīth (tradition literature); and, arguably, the Sharī'ah (divinely revealed religious law) which is derived primarily from the Qur'ān and the Hadīth. This essay explores key strategies employed by Islamic mystics from the eighth through the fourteenth centuries to interpret these various genres of Muslim scripture.

Qur'ān

To appreciate the role of the Qur'ān in early Sufism, it is first necessary to describe the complex literary structure of this unique text. Arabia was an oral society before Muhammad, during his lifetime, and after his death. Memory, more frequently than writing, was the primary storage mechanism for fables, heroic tales, and complex poetry; transmission was done through recitation, which gave rise to a professional class of reciter/apprentices.

The revelations of God to Muhammad, through the mediacy of the Angel Gabriel, began at Mecca in the year 610 C.E. and lasted until his death at Medina in 632 C.E. According to Muslim sources, the revelations were preserved in the minds and hearts of the faithful, along with perhaps some few revelations written on bones, palms, barks, and parchment during Muhammad's lifetime. While non-Muslim scholars continue to explore the extent to which Muhammad may have been involved with the collec-

tion and codification of the Qur'ānic revelations, Muslim scholars generally affirm the following traditional account.

Because of the dispersion of the rapidly expanding Muslim community and the deaths of close companions of the Prophet in battle, there was concern that the process of oral transmission of the revelations would be disrupted or, worse, that some revelations would be lost. The early caliphs who succeeded to Muhammad's role as guardian of the community began a complex process of collection, thus initiating the move from orality to text. Muslim tradition records that, during the reign of the third caliph 'Uthmān (644–656 C.E.), the process of collection and codification was completed.

Muslims insist that there was no editing of the Qur'ān text by humans and that Muhammad was illiterate (*ummi*) (see Qur'ān 7:157), which thus made it impossible for him to have written the revelations. All efforts at collection focused on preserving God's actual words as they were transmitted to Muhammad. Consequently, the written Qur'ān vividly reflects its oral origins. The text is structurally fluid, with key phrases being repeated; moreover, the revelations are composed in a rhymed prose, which thus facilitates memorization. The chapters, (*suras*), which range from only a few to several hundred verses, are rarely narrative in structure. Longer *suras*, especially, appear to be compilations of contemporaneous revelations.

Because of the imprecise and ambiguous nature of the Arabic orthography of the period, the 'Uthmānic recension of the Qur'ān could not reproduce what was stored in the memory of the faithful. There were no diacritical marks that could have distinguished consonants of similar shape, and there were few indications of vowels. Reliance on memory, therefore, was essential for interpreting the written text. Over several centuries, diacritics and vowel marks were added, so that eventually the written document mirrored closely the Qur'ān of the oral tradition.

By the time orthography was able to accurately reproduce what was preserved in memory (by the ninth–tenth centuries), a number of different readings or vowelings of the Qur'ān had achieved prominence, seven of which, with a long and distinguished pedigree, were eventually canonized. At a relatively early date, the affirmation of multiple readings of even a few verses or sections of the Qur'ān established the possibility that God intended verses of the Qur'ān to have not only one meaning but also potentially a constellation of legitimate interpretations.

Alongside the recognition of the protean quality of Qur'ānic orality and of the principle of multiple readings, in the eighth and ninth centuries there emerged two main genres of Qur'ānic exegesis. The first, *tafsīr* (exoteric interpretation), is based on analyses of grammar, philology, historical context, relation to earlier scriptures of the Christians and Jews, dogmatics, and law. A classic of this genre is the *Tafsīr* of at-Tabarī (d. 932 C.E.).

The second exegetical method is *ta'wīl* (esoteric interpretation), which is associated primarily with the Shī'ah community and with Sufi exegetes. For the Shī'ah, the focus on hidden meanings of the Qur'ān was intended to legitimate the claims of 'Alī (d. 661 C.E.) to the caliphate and to explore the theology of the Imām (infallible guide). For Sufis, *ta'wīl* unlocked the hidden (*bātin*) mystical meanings of the Qur'ān. A classic study of the emergence of Sufi *ta'wīl* is Paul Nwyia's *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique*, in which he demonstrates persuasively that early Sufi Qur'ān commentaries range from a more exoteric analysis of Qur'ānic terms, evident in the work of Muqātil

ibn Sulaymān (d. 767 C.E.), to the fully developed esoteric Sufi commentary of the Shīʿah Imām and Sufi, Jaʿfar as-Sādiq (d. 765 C.E.):

As an exegete, Muqātil focuses on the exoteric dimensions of the Qurʾān in which a symbol is situated alongside a Qurʾānic word, while Jaʿfar reads the Qurʾān through the mediacy of his own experience in which both symbol and word are synthesized. From that moment on, a new form of exegesis was established, which is no longer the reading of the Qurʾān but the reading of experience within [the context of] a new interpretation of the Qurʾān.¹

Sufi *taʾwīl* is predicated on the conviction that the Qurʾān is a living document, a “thou” rather than an “it.” Esoteric insight depends on the continued spiritual growth of the individual Sufi. The relationship between Sufi and sacred word is dynamic: as the Sufi achieves greater levels of spiritual insight, the word reveals more of its hidden meanings.

The Divine–human relationship in the Qurʾān is cemented by a covenant though which Lord (*rabb*) and servant (ʿ*abd*) are bound.² God’s sovereignty and His transcendence echo throughout the text. Scholars have argued that one of the catalysts for the emergence of Islamic mysticism in the eighth century was the desire on the part of some Muslims to balance the Qurʾānic emphasis on God’s radical otherness with an exploration of His immanence, which led to the establishment of a relationship of intimacy between the soul and the Creator.

The Qurʾān does not focus in any major way on spiritual interiority or mystical transformation but stresses faith in the oneness of God and in Muhammad’s role as messenger and seal of the prophets; the consequences of unbelief and hypocrisy; eschatology and apocalypticism; an elaborate system of ethics; the building of community; and ritual/legal obligations. As Annemarie Schimmel has pointed out, however, the Sufis mined the text for verses on which to base their claims for union with the divine. Most creative was the Sufi exegesis of Qurʾān 7:172, known as the verse of the primordial covenant, in which God calls forth, from the children of Adam, their seed—that is, all potential human souls—and asks, “Am I not Your Lord?” They cry out in unison, “Yes, we witness [to it].”³ Sufi theorists argue that there is no more significant expression of mystical union than this primordial covenant. And the goal of Sufism as a spiritual method is to recapture that moment and place it in a time before time, when God and the souls of all potential humans were most fully united. The verse is so well known among Sufi poets that the Arabic phrase *Alastu* (Am I not?) is all that is needed to evoke the image. In Persian and other non-Arabic mystical poetry, references to the “Day of Alast” (*rūz-i alast*) are common.

Qurʾānic verses that can be interpreted as affirming an ontological relationship between God and the soul are equally cherished. One of the most well known of these is *sura* 50:16: “We (God) are nearer to him than (his) jugular vein.” Literally, the pulsating life force is created by God at every moment, confirming His immanence within humankind. Equally as influential are *suras* 15:28–29 and 32:7–9, in which, at the moment of creation, God breathes into humans “of His Spirit” (*min rūhihi*), which thus establishes an ontological link between Creator and created that is essential if the soul is to come to know and experience the divine.

Farīd ad-Dīn ʿAttār (d.c. 1220 C.E.), in his sophisticated mystical fable *The Conference of the Birds*, compares the divine to the mythic bird, Simourgh. The birds’ souls’

ability to progress along the Sufi path is predicated on their essential ontological link with the Simourgh, without which they would have no recollection of the existence of the Simourgh and would not know that he can be sought. As ‘Attār describes it, the Simourgh in a distant past let one of his feathers fall to earth. The feather’s fame spread and each individual believed he or she knew its true form:

If the trace of his feather had not been made visible,
This worldwide uproar would not have occurred.
All of these signs were produced from its splendor,
All human souls (spring) from the trace of His feather.⁴

Ontology is not the only major focus of early Sufi theorists in their Qur’ānic exegesis. Perhaps more widespread are commentaries in the form of word studies, exploring individual Qur’ānic terms for their exoteric and/or esoteric implications for mysticism. Here again, Nwyia is particularly helpful. He discusses at length the work of the Sufi exegete Tirmidhī Hakīm (d.c. 932 C.E.), contrasting his approach to word analysis with that of the earlier commentator Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 767 C.E.):

It is clear, in fact, that Muqātil was content to align different meanings of the same word without making the effort to establish a hierarchy among these meanings. This [approach] gives at times an arbitrary quality to his inventory (of terms). The methodology that he followed, [namely], only to comment on the Qur’ān using the Qur’ān, and only to interpret a word by its context, probably did not allow him to discover a principle of order by which to hierarchize its various meanings (lit., *wujūh*, “faces”).

Tirmidhī was able to discover this principle thanks to a century of history during which Muslim consciousness moved from the stage of naive objectivity to that of subjective experience. Compared to this [commentary] of Muqātil, his [Tirmidhī Hakīm’s] work possesses major interest for us because it allows us to witness, as it covers the same ground where Muqātil worked, the transformation of a methodology, thanks to the insights that a new principle of exegesis afforded him: religious experience.⁵

One of the many Qur’ānic terms whose richness is revealed through Sufi exegesis is *dhikr* (remembrance). The root *dh-k-r* appears well over 250 times in the Qur’ān. But the phrases “remembrance of Allah” and “remember Allah” are the most evocative and ripe for Sufi interpretation.⁶ The exoteric analysis of Qur’ānic “remembrance” focuses on believers’ remembering God at all times; and on the acknowledgement by the faithful of God’s grace and blessing, manifest through His creative power and sovereignty over the cosmos. Sufi *ta’wīl*, in contrast, emphasizes interior transformation through the ritual repetition of divine names. Nwyia’s summary of Tirmidhī Hakīm’s commentary on *dhikr* is illuminating: “*Dhikr*, writes Tirmidhī, is the heart racing towards God, inflamed with His love (*hubb*) and (with) desire (*shawq*) for Him.”⁷

Sufi exegesis of Qur’ānic technical terminology is the basis for the evolution of another foundational genre of Sufi literature, namely, manuals of the spiritual life. The writers of Sufi manuals often included analyses of critical terms, both Qur’ānic and extra-Qur’ānic, in their overall exposition of the Sufi path. One of the most well known early manuals is the *Kitāb at-ta’arruf* of Abū Bakr Muhammad al-Kalābādhī (d. 990 C.E.), whose discussion of *dhikr* encompasses a number of themes that have become standard within the Sufi tradition. “True remembrance (*dhikr*),” explains al-Kalābādhī, “is that you forget everything except the One Remembered in the act of remembrance.”

Dhikr is a multifaceted practice with numerous hierarchical divisions.⁸ Al-Kalābādī, relying on the famous Sufi Ibn ‘Atā’ (d. 922 C.E.), outlines one model of the stages of *dhikr*:

The first is *dhikr* of the heart, meaning that the One Remembered is no longer forgotten but is now remembered. The second is *dhikr* of the attributes of the One Remembered. The third is contemplation of the One Remembered, which [requires] that one annihilate *dhikr* because the attributes of the One Remembered annihilate you from your own attributes, and thus you annihilate *dhikr*.⁹

There are many other classifications of Sufi *dhikr* that are found in the manual literature, but most emphasize that *dhikr* begins as an audible, rhythmic remembrance of God—*dhikr* of the tongue (*lisān*)—and progresses to *dhikr* of the heart (*qalb*), a soundless repetition of divine names in unison with the natural rhythm of heartbeats, culminating in *dhikr* of one’s innermost essence (*sirr*), wherein the seeker’s whole being resonates with the repetition of divine names.

Ḥadīth

The richness of Sufi theory based on Qur’ānic sources is equaled only by the Sufi hermeneutics of the second most important body of scripture in Islam—the tradition literature, or Ḥadīth. As a literary genre, the traditions mirror the fundamental orality of the Qur’ān. Not only did the early community focus on the preservation in memory of God’s Word, but also, Muslim sources insist they memorized the teachings of Muhammad and his earliest companions as well. During the ninth and tenth centuries, a number of scholars scoured the Islamic world to collect hundreds of thousands of these traditions, evaluating them for authenticity and preserving them in written form.

The process of authentication focused primarily on the chain of transmitters (*isnād*) for each Ḥadīth. Were the transmitters historically able to transmit to one another? Were they individuals of probity and sound learning? Ḥadīth scholars developed categories of varying reliability in order to classify Ḥadīth: *Sahīh*, sound; *Hasan*, good; *Da‘īf*, weak; *Saqīm*, infirm. Muslim Ḥadīth scholars did not scrutinize, in any significant way, the actual texts of the Ḥadīth as a means of verifying authenticity. If the *isnād* is affirmed as sound, the body of the text (*matn*) is presumed to be fundamentally accurate.

The reason for this reluctance to subject the *matn* to internal criticism was Muslim scholars’ insistence that, as with the Qur’ān, the Ḥadīth are divinely inspired—it is not for humans to tamper with either of these genres of Islamic scripture, only to preserve and interpret them. As the famous theologian al-Ghazālī (d. 1111 C.E.) argues:

God does not have two words, one expressed in the Qur’ān style which we are bidden to recite publicly, and called the Qur’ān, while the other word is not Qur’ān. God has but one word which differs in the mode of its expression. On occasions, God indicates His Word by the Qur’ān, on others, by words in another style, not publicly recited, and called Sunna (i.e., Ḥadīth). Both were mediated by the Prophet.¹⁰

The move from orality to text in the tradition literature evolved over several centuries, culminating in the ninth and tenth centuries, at which time a number of extensive

collections of Ḥadīth were prepared by Muslim scholars. The two best-known ones are the multivolume collections of al-Bukhārī (d. 870 C.E.) and of Muslim (d. 875 C.E.), although a number of others achieved prominence in both Sunnī and Shīʿah circles.¹¹

The question of the authenticity of Ḥadīth is perhaps most contentious between Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. The majority of traditional Muslims are committed to the belief that the Ḥadīth are historically accurate. The process of collection, evaluation, and codification of Ḥadīth, they insist, was fundamentally sound, preserving only those Ḥadīth that are, on the whole, reliable. Non-Muslim scholars argue a substantially different position—namely, that many, if not most, Ḥadīth came into existence later than the period of Muhammad’s life and that their contents often reflect theological and legal debates of a significantly later period. Unfortunately, several prominent non-Muslim scholars described this process of Ḥadīth creation as “fabrication,” asserting that most Ḥadīth are fraudulent constructions employed by lawyers, theologians, and politicians to foist their positions on the Islamic community. The term *fabrication* is offensive and understood by Muslim scholars as a blatant attempt to derogate Islamic scripture.

There is a certain irony in the fact that European and American scholars, many of whom are Christians and Jews, continue to use the term *fabrication* for Ḥadīth without describing their own scriptures in similar fashion. Modern New Testament scholarship, for example, has proven without a doubt that the Christian scriptures are texts produced considerably later than the period of Jesus’ lifetime and are a fascinating combination of history and myth, in which critical theological questions are resolved by putting solutions into the mouth of the founder.

While the narrative structure of the New Testament is different from the *isnād-matn* structure of Ḥadīth, the function of both scriptures is similar, for they ground change and theological development in the original experience that spawned the movement. These texts are sophisticated and successful attempts to ensure that the later community, different though it may be from the community that existed during the lifetime of the founder, understands that it is fundamentally continuous with the original vision.

The use of *isnāds* for authenticating traditions carries over into biographical and historical texts, as well as into Qur’ān commentary. A myth of critical importance both for the Muslim community and for Sufi theorists is the story of the night journey and the ascension of Muhammad. It appears in the early biography of Muhammad, *Sīrat rasūl Allah*, by Ibn Ishāq (d. 767 C.E.), in Ḥadīth form. After listing the major figures, both male and female, on whose testimony he relies for details of the story, Ibn Ishāq explains how he will organize the material:

The following account reached me from. . . ; [the lengthy list of transmitters follows]. It is pieced together in the story that follows, each one contributing something of what he was told about what happened when he [Muhammad] was taken on the night journey. . . . It was certainly an act of God by which He took him by night in what way He pleased to show him His signs, which He willed him to see so that he witnessed His mighty sovereignty and power by which He does what He wills to do.¹²

Ibn Ishāq’s version covers the basic outlines of the myth: Muhammad falls asleep near the sacred cube (*Ka’bah*) in Mecca and is carried miraculously by Gabriel from Mecca to Jerusalem, from where he ascends through the seven heavens while being mounted

on the fabled steed Burāq; and he encounters the prophets of the Jewish and Christian traditions, who acknowledge that Muhammad supersedes them. In some later versions Muhammad actually enters the divine presence and sees God.

Over time, the night journey and the ascension evolved into the subjects of an elaborate and multilayered myth, examples of which exist in all Islamic languages.¹³ Interestingly, however, later versions include only a radically abridged *isnād* or none at all, perhaps because the story was so widely accepted and no longer needed authentication. Many of the complex elements of the myth of the night journey and the ascension lent themselves in a very creative way to Sufi interpretation. Muhammad's ascent through the seven heavens (which in the original myth is concerned with affirming Islam's continuity with, and supersession of, the Abrahamic faiths and with Muhammad's role as seal of the prophets) is interpreted by Sufis as an allegory of the spiritual path. The soul mounts through seven stages of mystical transformation, which culminate in the vision of the Beloved.

‘Attār's mystical fable, *The Conference of the Birds*, mirrors this seven-tiered structure in its description of the seven valleys through which the birds must pass in order to reach the Simourgh.¹⁴ In another of his epic poems, *the Ilāhī-nāma, or Book of God*, ‘Attār states, in greater detail, his mystical interpretation of Muhammad's night journey and ascension in the traditional introductory encomium that cites the Prophet:

When the Holy Prophet set out upon Burāq, he rose with the speed of lightning to the seventh heaven.

He rose, thus mounted, up to the throne of God, for he was lord of Burāq and of the pulpit.

He unfurled his banner over the empyrean and took his stand on the "seat of truth."

[See Qur'ān 54:544–555]

There came a cry from the denizens of the heavens: "The Lord of the World has come to the trysting-place."

After a description of Muhammad's encounters with the Abrahamic prophets, and the ecstasy of the cosmos in response to his ascension, the poet brilliantly translates Muhammad's traditional encounter with God during his ascension into an allegory of mystical union.

So did his soul perspire with longing for God that he rent his robe into a hundred pieces.

Aye, since the sky was his robe he rent it all, for that night he could do nothing else.

The proof of this is the Milky Way, which is made up of small pieces of the nine curtains.

Those nine curtains were rent to pieces during his ascension, because he was the intimate of God forever.

The Prophet said: "Lord, Thou knowest how I feel, Thou hast no need to question me.

Thy favours are so continuous that I cannot count them; my tongue is tied.

Nothing is left of my being; all is now sun, the shadow is gone."¹⁵

Annemarie Schimmel points out that in ‘Attār's mystical interpretation of the night journey and the ascension, Gabriel plays a unique role. Despite his angelic nature, Gabriel is not permitted to enter the divine presence, but must wait "at the lote tree of the farthest boundary" (Qur'ān 53:14). Only Muhammad is permitted to enter, demonstrating Muhammad's superiority over both the material and spiritual worlds:

In the famous *ḥadīth* connected with this mystery the Prophet said *Lī maʿa Allah waqt . . .*, “I have a time with God to which even Gabriel, who is pure spirit, is not admitted.”¹⁶ This remark is interpreted as pertaining to the mystery of the heavenly journey, in which the Prophet was taken out of serial, created time and touched by the Eternal Now of God. The term *waqt*, “time,” then, became a central concept in Sufi life: The Sufi is called to give himself over completely to this Divine moment, to be *ibnuʾl-waqt*, “son of the moment,” that is, to live in the moment of Divine inspiration.¹⁷

It is Muhammad who epitomizes the “son of the moment”; and al-Hujwīrī (d.c. 1071 C.E.), in his renowned Sufi manual, *Kashf al-mahjūb*, understands Muhammad’s ascension as his mounting to the mystical station of proximity to the divine.¹⁸

He [Muhammad] desired that his body should be destroyed and his personality be dissolved, but God’s purpose was to establish His proof. He bade the Apostle remain in the state that he was in; whereupon he gained strength and displayed the existence of God from out of his own nonexistence and said, “I am not as one of you. Verily, I pass the night with my Lord, and he gives me food and drink”; and he also said, “I am with God in a state in which none of the cherubim nor any prophet is capable of being contained with me.”¹⁹

The exaltation of Muhammad within Sufi circles was the catalyst for a fascinating process of revisionist history, which argues that Muhammad was himself a Sufi saint who underwent spiritual transformation before his appointment by God to the prophetic office. The link between sainthood and prophecy was explored by numerous classical Sufi authors like al-Hujwīrī, who defends the moderate view that saints are never superior to prophets; rather, the saint’s role is to confirm the prophetic mission. The final stage of saintship is only the beginning of prophecy and, while all prophets are saints, not all saints rise to the prophetic office.²⁰

Many of the most creative *Ḥadīth* employed by Sufi poets and theorists are not found in the early canonical collections but most probably emerge out of later Sufi circles. When *Ḥadīth* appear in a Sufi text, they frequently lack full *isnāds*; the text is simply introduced by indicating that the Apostle Muhammad said such and such. The creation of *Ḥadīth* by Sufis, in order to substantiate their theoretical claims for mysticism, is analogous to the creation of canonical *Ḥadīth* in an effort to argue particular theological and legal positions. One of the most interesting subgenres of *Ḥadīth*, which Sufis employed with great skill to promote their mystical theory, is known as *Ḥadīth Qudsī*—that is, *Ḥadīth* whose *isnāds* go back not to Muhammad but to God himself. While some *Ḥadīth Qudsī* appear in the canonical sources, many that are fundamental to Sufism are noncanonical.

The most famous of these Sufi *Ḥadīth Qudsī* is one whose philosophical core resonates throughout thirteenth-century mystical poetry and philosophy: God said, “I was a hidden treasure and I desired to be known, so I created creation in order that I might be known.”²¹ In some Sufi versions of this *Ḥadīth Qudsī*, the phrase “I desired to be known” is replaced by “I desired to be loved.”²² The renowned poet Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273 C.E.) integrates this *Ḥadīth Qudsī* into one of his well-known poems, vividly capturing the significance of his *Ḥadīth Qudsī* for Sufism:

David²³ said, O King [of the universe], since you have no need of us,
Tell us at last what wisdom there was in creating the two worlds.

The [God who is] Truth answered him, "O temporal man, I was a hidden treasure,
 I desired that that treasure of beneficence and favour be revealed,
 I made manifest a mirror, its face the heart, its back the world,
 Its back is better than its face if you have no knowledge of the face."²⁴

This particular Ḥadīth Qudsī reinterprets in dramatic fashion the traditional creation myth in the Qur'ān. As in the Hebrew and the Christian scriptural traditions, God in the Qur'ān is understood to create *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). In contrast, the Sufi understanding of creation enshrined in this Ḥadīth Qudsī is considerably more reminiscent of Hellenistic emanation theory than of *creatio ex nihilo*. This emanationist model is foundational to the mystical philosophy of Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240 C.E.) and of his school, and to his key concept of *wahdat al-wujūd* (the unity of being). All created reality, which is a projection of God, will eventually return to the source from which it emerged, the undifferentiated One. Created reality, including the soul, possesses only an illusory independence. Eventually the soul will return to the One, like a drop of water returning to the ocean. As the Persian poets of the period repeat time and time again, *Hamé ūst* (All is He).

Rūmī's identification in his poem of the face of the mirror with the heart of the Sufi points once again to the fundamental ontological link between God and humans. Another well-known Sufi Ḥadīth reinforces this ontological vision: "He who knows his inner self, knows his Lord." Schimmel explains that mystical theorists have relied heavily on this particular Ḥadīth: "To know one's innermost heart means to discover the point at which the divine is found as the *dulcis hospes animae*, the meeting point of the human and the divine."²⁵

For Sufi theorists like al-Hujwīrī, this particular Ḥadīth points first to the realization that humans are finite and perishable, while God is infinite and eternal; that God is the Almighty Lord and humans are humble servants. Second, this Ḥadīth evokes the experiences of gnosis (*ma'rifah*) and of annihilation (*fanā'*), in which the self is obliterated in the divine:

In this sense the Apostle said: "He who knows himself has come to know his Lord," i.e., he who knows himself to be annihilated knows God to be eternally subsistent. Annihilation destroys reason and all human attributes, and when the substance of a thing is not accessible to reason it cannot possibly be known without amazement (*hayrah*).²⁶

In Rūmī's work, creation, while clearly a reflection of the divine, can become a trap if the Sufi does not progress through the signs of God in the material world to an encounter with Him in the heart/soul. In the Sufi quest for union with the divine, the role of the world and materiality is a hotly contested issue. Perhaps the greatest contrast to Rūmī's love of nature is found in the writings of one of the earliest and best-known Sufi ascetics, Hasan al-Basrī (d. 728 C.E.). In a letter to the Umayyad caliph 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz, who ruled the empire from 717 to 720 C.E., Hasan quotes a tradition from God that is more reminiscent of gnosticism than of traditional Islam: "For this world has neither worth nor weight with God; so slight it is, it weighs not with God so much as a pebble or a single clod of earth; as I am told, God has created nothing more hateful to Him than the world, and from the day He created it He has not looked upon it, so much He hates it."²⁷ While Rūmī's understanding of the role of the world in mysticism is the more

prevalent, there is no doubt that Sufis in general were highly suspicious of the world's enticements and feared its ultimately corrupting influence.

Sharī'ah

During Muhammad's lifetime, the reign of the first four caliphs, and the Umayyad dynasty (661 C.E.–750 C.E.), Muslim legal practice was based primarily on the general ethical principles and specific regulations articulated in the Qur'ānic revelations and on the pre-Islamic customary law of Arabia, Syria, and Iraq. As Joseph Schacht points out in his seminal work on Islamic law, the legal debates in the eighth and ninth centuries were over whether local customary law would be the principal basis for evolving legal theory, or whether Ḥadīth that went back to Muhammad would be the principal foundational element.²⁸ The former position argued for diversity by canonizing long-standing local legal practices; the latter argued the need for a universal legal theory that would apply in all cultural areas and would mirror the universality of the Qur'ān. The latter position prevailed, due particularly to the brilliant work of the legal theorist ash-Shāfi'ī (d. 820 C.E.).

Four classical schools of Islamic law (*Sharī'ah*) eventually emerged as the primary repositories of canonical legal theory, each school being named after a prominent theorist of the period: the Hanafī School (named after Abū Hanīfa, d. 767 C.E.), the Mālikī School (after Mālik ibn Anas, d. 796 C.E.), the Shāfi'ī School (after ash-Shāfi'ī, d. 820 C.E.), and the Hanbalī School (after Ahmad ibn Hanbal, d. 855 C.E.). Shī'ah religious law is often included by scholars as a fifth school. The differences among the four canonical Sunnī legal schools are considerably fewer than the areas in which they agree. One or the other school tends to predominate in a particular geographical region, although in complex urban environments all schools are represented.

Islamic legal theory (*fiqh*) is founded primarily on the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth, while *qiyās* (the use of analogy) and *ijmā'* (community consensus) are recognized by scholars as key parts of the process as well. Since Sharī'ah is derived from revealed and inspired scripture (the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth), it too is understood to be divinely inspired. Islamic law, argue traditional legists, is not a human construct that can be altered or changed at will. On the contrary, the ideals and prescriptions of Sharī'ah are universally applicable and ahistorical, in the sense that they are not bound or conditioned by any historical moment but have been true in the past, are true now, and will be true in the future.

Despite the centrality of this divinely revealed legal tradition in Islam, Sufis debated, sometimes fiercely, the appropriate role of Sharī'ah in mysticism. While the debate is interesting, more relevant are the different ways various classical Sufis actually dealt with religious law in their mystical theory. For example, one early group known as the Malāmatiyya (seekers after blame) engaged in private strict observance of the law, while in public they acted in ways shocking to the community. Schimmel recounts a story related by the poet Jāmī (d. 1492 C.E.) about a famous Sufi, who, on entering a town, was hailed by the inhabitants. But as the entourage progressed down the road, the Sufi urinated in a ritually objectionable fashion. The crowd dispersed and people never again believed in his spiritual accomplishments. The Malāmatiyya

were so committed to *ikhlās* (total sincerity) that they deliberately chose to keep secret their spiritual progress and good deeds. Moreover, the condemnation of them by the community prevented their succumbing to excessive pride.²⁹

The Malāmatiyya represents a clear minority among Sufis of the classical period. A considerably more complex and sophisticated reinterpretation of the role of Sharīʿah is epitomized by the writings of one of the great Sufis of the tenth century, Husayn ibn Mansūr al-Hallāj (d. 922 C.E.), whose “*Ana ʿl-Haqq*” (I am the divine truth!) rings throughout the history of Sufism as the paradigmatic ecstatic utterance.

For many in the Islamic community, both Sufi and non-Sufi, al-Hallāj’s ecstatic cry “*Ana ʿl-Haqq*” was tantamount to self-divinization, equating himself with God, one of whose ninety-nine names is al-Haqq. Al-Hallāj defends himself by comparing his state to two figures from the Qurʾān: the devil (Iblīs) and Pharaoh. In a masterful exercise of Qurʾānic *taʿwīl*, al-Hallāj argues that both Iblīs and Pharaoh attained unique levels of spiritual intimacy with the divine.³⁰ Despite the fact that both are condemned in traditional sources as prideful sinners, al-Hallāj insists that their actions were morally correct and dictated by the Beloved:

My friend and my teacher are Iblīs and Pharaoh. Iblīs was threatened with the fire, but he did not go back on his preaching. And Pharaoh was drowned in the Red Sea, but he did not acknowledge any mediator at all. . . . And if I were killed, or if my hands and feet were cut off, I would not go back on my preaching.³¹

Al-Hallāj’s paradoxical spiritual elevation of Iblīs and Pharaoh, and his insistence that God’s curse is in fact a sign of His unique favor, are key elements in his understanding of the role of Sharīʿah in mysticism. Al-Hallāj’s writings imply that two levels of legal observance exist, one exoteric and the other esoteric. Exoteric law—that is, traditional Sharīʿah—applies primarily to the masses of the Muslim community. For the ecstatic Sufi, in contrast, behavior is dictated not solely by Sharīʿah but also by the beloved, who reveals His will to the lover in the experience of mystical union.

What is most interesting about al-Hallāj’s approach to law is his affirmation that both the exoteric and esoteric models are true, but that they apply to different people according to their spiritual accomplishments. In one of his most famous poems, al-Hallāj expresses this position dramatically by insisting that his own execution is sanctioned by the exoteric law, while his ecstatic utterances, for which he is being condemned, are sanctioned by the hidden guidance of the beloved—both the community and al-Hallāj act in accordance with God’s will. He writes:

Kill me my trusted friends,
for in my death is my life!
Death for me is in living, and
life for me is in dying.
The obliteration of my essence
is the noblest of blessings.
My perdurance in my human attributes,
the vilest of evils.³²

Other Sufis of the classical period expressed even more radical reinterpretations of Sharīʿah. Abū Saʿīd ibn Abī ʿl-Khayr (d. 1049 C.E.), for example, began his life as a Sufi ascetic who meticulously observed the Sharīʿah. It is said that he never ate during

the day, nor did he sleep at night except by standing up. In one story, his father discovers him hanging by his feet in a pit while he recites the Qur'ān.

Yet when Abū Sa'īd attained gnosis (*ma'rifah*) during his fortieth year—a state he enjoyed until his death—he abandoned his asceticism because he was now totally detached from worldly realities. Whether he dressed in rags or brocade, it was all the same because of his spiritual state.

In addition to his rejection of the ascetic life, Abū Sa'īd also challenged pivotal ritual practices enshrined in the Shari'ah. The tradition reports that, on one occasion, Abū Sa'īd and his disciples were engaged in *samā'*, listening to music and performing ritual dance, when a pious Muslim interrupted to announce the time of prayer. Abū Sa'īd replied that they were already at prayer and ordered that the rapturous music and dance continue.

Another fable focuses on Abū Sa'īd's refusal to perform the required hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca: "Why have I not performed the Pilgrimage? It is no great matter that thou shouldst tread under thy feet a thousand miles of ground in order to visit a stone house." More shocking is his proclamation that the celestial archetype of the *Ka'bah* comes several times a day to circumambulate him!³³

There is real danger in interpreting these Sufi fables literally. Whether or not Abū Sa'īd in fact said and did what his biographer claims he said and did is impossible to verify. There is no doubt, however, that this particular genre of Sufi fable in which Shari'ah was challenged was relatively common. More often than not, however, the point of the challenge is not to suggest that Sufis reject Islamic law, but to illustrate vividly that, while traditional legal practice is appropriate for the majority of Muslims, Sufis must not lose sight of their higher calling—the attainment of mystical union.

This challenge of Shari'ah can be found in the works of Sufis who are themselves archconservatives in terms of law and Qur'ānic exegesis. 'Abdullāh Ansārī (d. 1089 C.E.), whose book of prayerful colloquies, *Munājāt*, is a classic of the spiritual life, was a follower of the most conservative intellectual tradition in law and theology—that of Ibn Hanbal. Yet his embracing of textual literalism resulted in Ansārī's refusal to require logic from scripture. On the contrary, he gloried in the paradoxes inherent in his literalism:

Whether the Beloved gives us agony or pleasure,
Whatever comes from the Beloved is good.
We do not think of good or evil—
Our intent is His pleasure and contentment.³⁴

Ansārī, like Abū Sa'īd, criticizes traditional ritual practice in order to jolt the Sufi initiate into taking seriously the goals of mysticism. The five pillars of Islam, he suggests, are a distraction for the Sufi. The pilgrimage appears an occasion for tourism; almsgiving is something that should be left to philanthropists; fasting is a fine way to conserve food; and ritual prayer should be left to old women.

Fall in love:
That is doing something!³⁵

While Abū Sa'īd's and Ansārī's use of Shari'ah is especially creative, it is important to realize that most Sufis expressed a more moderate position, emphasizing that

the mystic must remain faithful to the religious obligations embodied in Islamic law even as he continues on the quest for gnosis and union. Al-Ghazālī takes the argument one step further, arguing that obligatory rituals and, by extension, all religious laws are essential to spiritual growth and should be compared to complex medical remedies employed by physicians. While medicines cure the body's ills, ritual practices are cures for the soul. It is impossible to fully understand why medicines are effective, so the patient must blindly obey the physician who has learned his art from the prophets, who, because of their prophetic powers, came to understand the medicinal properties of natural substances:

In a similar fashion it became necessarily evident to me that the reason for the effectiveness of the remedies of the acts of worship, with their prescriptions and determined quantities ordained by the prophets, cannot be perceived by means of the intellectual resources of men endowed with intellect. On the contrary, they must be the object of blind obedience to the prophets who perceived those qualities by the light of prophecy, not by intellectual resources.³⁶

Rather than relegate the efficacy of religious law solely to the exoteric realm of the nonmystic, al-Ghazālī insists that legal observance keeps the Sufi immersed in the broader community that mediates spiritual power. To abandon the legal tradition is to abandon any link to the Islamic community (*Ummah*) and thus to be incapable of true spiritual growth. Sharī'ah, contrary to being a barrier or, worse, superfluous, is essential to progress along the Sufi path.

NOTES

1. Paul Nwyia, *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique* (Beirut, 1970), pp. 160–161.
2. See especially Qur'ān 2:83–96, 3:81, 5:7, 5:12–14, 5:70–71, 7:172–173, 20:115, and 33:7–8.
3. Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, 1975), pp. 23–26.
4. Farīduddīn 'Attār, *Mantiq 't-tayr*, ed. Muhammad Javād Mashkūr (Tehran, 1353 A.H./1968 C.E.), p. 47, ll. 6–7. For a very readable free translation in verse of this particular work, see *The Conference of the Birds*, trans. and intro. Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis (New York, 1984).
5. Nwyia, *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique*, p. 120.
6. The phrase “remembrance of Allah” occurs in *sūras* 5:91, 13:28, 24:37, 29:45, 39:22, 39:23, 57:16, 58:19, 62:9, and 63:9; the phrase “remember Allah” occurs in *sūras* 2:198, 2:200, 2:203, 2:239, 4:103, 33:41, and 62:10.
7. Nwyia, *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique*, p. 130.
8. Abu Bakr Muhammad al-Kalābādhī, *Kitāb at-ta 'arruf li madhhab ahli 't-tasawwuf*, ed. 'Abd al-Halīm Mahmoud and Taha 'Abd al-Bāqī Sarūr (Cairo, 1380 A.H./1960 C.E.), p. 103. For an English translation of this Sufi manual, see A. J. Arberry, *The Doctrine of the Sufis* (Cambridge, 1966).
9. al-Kalābādhī, *Kitāb at-ta 'arruf*, p. 106. For an interesting discussion of various kinds of *dhikr* and its role in Sufism, see Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, pp. 167–178.
10. Abū Hāmid Muhammad al-Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-Mustasfā*, 2 vols. (Cairo, 1322 A.H.), vol. 1, p. 125. This passage is quoted by John Burton in *The Collection of the Qur'ān* (Cambridge, 1977), p. 57.

11. Among the Sunnis, the following individuals are credited with the most authentic collections of Ḥadīth: al-Bukhārī (d. 870 C.E.), Muslim (d. 875 C.E.), Abū Dawūd (d. 888 C.E.), at-Tirmidhī (d. 892 C.E.), Ibn Māja (d. 886 C.E.), and An-Nasā'ī (d. 915 C.E.). In addition to the above, the Shī'ah community canonized a number of collections of traditions whose *isnāds* focus primarily on 'Alī and his descendants, the later Shī'ah Imāms. Among these collections are those of al-Kulaynī (d. 939 C.E.), al-Qummī (d. 991 C.E.), at-Tūsī (d. 1067 C.E.), and ash-Sharīf al-Murtadā (d. 1044 C.E.). In the same way that Shī'ah *ta'wīl* was used to legitimate the claims of 'Alī and his family, so too do Shī'ah Ḥadīth function as critical sources of political and religious legitimization.
12. Muhammad ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishāq's Sirat Rasul Allah*, trans. Alfred Guillaume, (Oxford, 1955; rpt. Lahore, 1974), pp. 181–182.
13. One of the most popular Arabic versions is the *Mi'rāj al-kabīr* of Najm ad-Dīn al-Ghayrī (d. 1574 C.E.), trans. Arthur Jeffery, in *A Reader on Islam* (The Hague, 1962; rpt. New York, 1980). See also the translation of a Swahili version of the myth in *Textual Sources for the Study of Islam*, ed. and trans. Andrew Rippin and Jan Knappert (Chicago, 1990), pp. 68–72. A superb illuminated manuscript from Central Asia of the night journey and the ascension has been edited by Marie-Rose Séguy, *The Miraculous Journey of Mahomet: Mi'rāj-Nāmeḥ* (New York, 1977).
14. Farīd ad-Dīn 'Attār, *The Conference of the Birds*, pp. 166–229.
15. Farīd ad-Dīn 'Attār. *The Ilāhī-nāma or Book of God*, trans. John Andrew Boyle (Manchester, 1976), pp. 12–13, 15–16.
16. This Ḥadīth, Schimmel indicates, can be found in Badī 'uzzamān Furūzānfar's *Aḥādīth-i Mathnawī* (Tehran, 1955), n.100.
17. Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger* (Chapel Hill, 1985), pp. 168–169.
18. There continued to be a serious debate among classical Sufi writers about whether or not Muhammad actually saw God during his ascension. Al-Kalābādhī, in his *Kitāb at-ta'arruf*, summarizes the different positions and argues for the more moderate view, asserting that Muhammad did not see God with his eyes. Yet he acknowledges that some Sufis insist that Muhammad saw God and that he was unique among humans for having been granted this vision by God. See Arberry's translation of the *Kitāb at-ta'arruf*, in *The Doctrine of the Sufis*, pp. 29–30.
19. Alī ibn Uthmān al-Hujwīrī, *The Kashf al-mahjūb*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson, Gibb Memorial Series, no. 17 (Oxford, 1911; rpt. Delhi, 1982), p. 283. See also pp. 380–381, where al-Hujwīrī describes Muhammad's actual encounter with God during his ascension: "The Apostle conversed secretly with God, and when he reached the goal his tongue became dumb before the revelation of God's majesty, and his heart was amazed at His infinite greatness, and he said, "I cannot tell Thy praise."
20. al-Hujwīrī, *The Kashf al-mahjūb*, trans. Nicholson, pp. 235–236.
21. The Arabic form of this Ḥadīth is "kuntu kanzan makhfiyyan, wa ahbabtu an u'rafa fa khalaktu 'l-khalqa likay u'rafa."
22. Annemarie Schimmel, *I Am Wind, You Are Fire* (Boston, 1992), p. 74.
23. The reference is to King David of the Hebrew Bible, the author of the Psalms (*zabūr*). David was a particular favorite because of his involvement in poetry, music, and dance.
24. See Reynold A. Nicholson, *Selected Poems from the Dīvāni Shamsi Tabrīz* (Cambridge, 1988; rpt., 1977), pp. 14–15. Nicholson provides the Persian text of the poem and his translation, which differs slightly from mine.
25. In Arabic the Ḥadīth reads, "man 'arafa nafsahu faqad 'arafa rabbahu." See Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, pp. 189–190.
26. See al-Hujwīrī, *The Kashf al-mahjūb*, trans. Nicholson, pp. 197 and 275.

27. For a translation of excerpts of this letter, see A. J. Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (London, 1950), pp. 33–35.
28. Joseph Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law* (Oxford, 1964), p. 48. See also Schacht's earlier work, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford, 1950).
29. For a brief discussion of the Malāmatiyya and various Sufi writers' opinions on this movement, see Paul Nwyia, *Ibn 'Atā' Allah (709/1309) et la naissance de la confrérie shādhilite* (Beirut, 1972), pp. 243–244, and Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, pp. 86–87.
30. See Qur'ān 7:12, 38:76, and 79:24.
31. Husayn ibn Mansūr al-Hallāj, *Kitāb at-tawāsīn*, ed. Louis Massignon (Paris, 1913), p. 49, #19.
32. Husayn ibn Mansūr al-Hallāj, *Le diwan d'al-Hallāj*, ed. Louis Massignon (Paris, 1955), pp. 33–34.
33. Reynold A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Cambridge, 1921; rpt., 1978), pp. 60–62.
34. Abdullāh Ansārī, *Munājāt* (Intimate conversations), trans. Wheeler M. Thackston in *The Book of Wisdom and Intimate Conversations*, trans. Victor Danner and Wheeler M. Thackston (New York, 1978), p. 193.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 216–217.
36. Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *Freedom and Fulfillment: An Annotated Translation of al-Ghazālī's al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl and Other Relevant Works of al-Ghazālī*, trans. Richard J. McCarthy, S. J. (Boston, 1980), pp. 101–102.

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