

A Sufi Master without a Hospice: Abdolkarim Soroush between Sufism and Mysticism

Ashkan Bahrani¹

Vanderbilt Divinity School
411 21st Ave S
Nashville, TN 37240
USA
ashkan.bahrani@vanderbilt.edu

Aydogan Kars²

School of Philosophical, Historical and International Studies
Monash University (Clayton Campus)
VIC 3800
Australia
aydogan.kars@monash.edu

Abstract

This article examines the conceptions of Sufism and mysticism by the influential Iranian intellectual, Abdolkarim Soroush (b.1945). It situates the academic and intellectual products of Soroush in the context of Islamic modernism to study him within the discipline of religious studies in general, and Islamic studies in particular. It traces the evolution of his attitude through two relatively distinct and concurrently interconnected periods of his intellectual development. We argue that the concept of ‘Sufism’ emerged in his thought in the late 1980s as an ideal type that allowed Soroush to pursue multi-layered projects. These projects include a liberal Islam where the privatisation of religion through mysticism plays a key role, and a mild nationalist project where the concept of ‘mysticism’ is universalised in order to imagine an Iranian community that is in con-

1. Ashkan Bahrani is a PhD Candidate of religious studies in the Graduate Department of Religion at Vanderbilt University. His main field of research is medieval Islamic mysticism as well as method and theory in the study of religion.

2. Aydogan Kars is a lecturer in Islamic and Interreligious Studies at Monash University. His primary research field is Islamic intellectual history, with a focus on medieval mysticism, theology and philosophy.

versation with mysticisms of other religious traditions. We also observe that his reading of Sufism suffers from a chronic essentialism, which is exercised through ideal types. His understanding of mysticism also follows a version of experientialism in its early twentieth-century Jamesian fashion. Accordingly, the politicised demarcations of mysticism in his intellectual project are crystallised.

Keywords

modern Islamic thought; Iran; Abdolkarim Soroush; Sufism; mysticism.

Introduction: The Theologian and the Modernist

An intellectual is a Sufi master without a hospice [*khānaqāh*]. He [or she] is powerful without having any political position (Soroush 1998: 36).

In the academic and public intellectual spheres in contemporary Iran, the so-called mystical dimension of Islam plays a particularly important role. Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to claim that Iranian intellectuals and academics have spilled too much ink (and probably more vocally, delivered countless lectures) about the unruly twin ‘synonyms’, namely mysticism [*irfān*] and Sufism [*taṣavvuf*], and the ways in which they have influenced the lives of Iranian citizens during the last century. In this article, we will examine the conceptions of Sufism and mysticism by one of the most influential living Iranian public intellectuals, Abdolkarim Soroush (b.1945) (Amburn 2009) from a religious studies perspective.

Our main argument is that throughout his tumultuous intellectual life and despite shifts in his views about the relationship between Islam and politics as well as his theoretical approach towards religion and religious knowledge, one can discern some relatively unchanged elements with repetitive patterns in Soroush’s attitude towards Sufism and mysticism. The first two sections of the article are dedicated to a presentation of his thoughts about mysticism (and its relation to society) and his critique of Sufism. First, as for the primary phase of his intellectual journey, we will indicate how the notion of mysticism with a Shiite flavour prevails in his work, while the notion of Sufism is barely present in this period. Second, we will show how his post-Islamist, mild nationalist political project in the second phase of his career sets the scene for a depoliticised and textualist approach to Sufi literature with a clear focus on Persian Sufism. The next two sections will be dedicated to our critical considerations about his approach to Sufism and mysticism. First, we will problematise his

understanding of different disciplines of religious knowledge, including Sufism and mysticism, which is realised through an essentialist understanding based upon ideal types. In the next step, we will show how his political project along with his Jamesian experientialism predetermine Soroush's reception of premodern Sufism. All in all, we will make a conceptual contribution to religious studies by displaying the politicised nature of the conceptions of 'Sufism' and 'mysticism' in the native context of modern Iran through this critical study of Soroush.

As a polymath who has developed expertise in several disciplines in humanities and natural sciences, Soroush frequently takes advantage of Muslim mystical literature in the articulation of his works. Clearly infatuated with mysticism even in his works on the philosophy of science, in which his academic background in pharmacy and chemistry is at work, he often quotes the works of Sufi poetry, most vividly those of Rumi (d.1273) (e.g., Soroush 1990a: XXVII). Soroush (e.g., 1999: 10) celebrates Rumi as 'one of the highest mystical pinnacles of our history and culture'. At times, it is hard to distinguish whether the latter is hired to serve as the former's interpreter or the other way around. The interwoven dialogue between Rumi and Soroush wrapped up in a sense of devotion that Soroush expresses about his master is fascinating where, for instance, he states unhesitatingly: 'I analyse, and do not praise, except for the time that I face a glorious beloved like Rumi whom I unconsciously praise!' (Soroush 1998: 58; cf. Soroush 2001e: 59–61).

Soroush approaches mysticism from two main standpoints: as an heir of Islamic modernism who has a particularly liberal agenda of empowering the individual, and as an heir of Shiite seminarian mysticism whose longing is to integrate Islamic dogmatics and spirituality through a perspective that relates conveniently to the needs of contemporary audiences (Soroush 2001d: 41). Soroush is quite conscious that these two standpoints are sublimely interdependent. In the final analysis, his role as a modernist mystical theologian and public intellectual will supposedly contribute to the filling of the gaps between tradition and modernity, 'the vernacular and the alien culture' (Soroush 1998: 26–27).

Soroush's approach to mysticism especially in the first decade of his career aligns with the latter standpoint of mystical theology most notably reflected in the works of his inspirations, Ruhullah Khomeini (d.1989), Murtaza Mutahhari (d.1979), and to a lesser degree, Muhammad-Husayn Tabataba'i (d.1981) (Soroush 1996: 37–38; cf. Knysh 1992). It is with this generation that the revolutionary potential of mysticism and its compatibility with Twelver Shiism began to be highlighted with the emergence of the concept of 'social mysticism' [*'irfān-i ijtimā'ī*]. Under

the Pahlavid monarchy, the elite were often associated with or prided themselves on their mysticism, and this individualised mystical Shiism was played off against revolutionary Islam. The so-called 'New Mysticism' movement launched in 1942 by Ḥusayn Kazimzada Iranshahr (d.1962) on the basis of his notion of 'esoteric mysticism' [*ʿirfān-i bāṭinī*] had become increasingly prominent in the late Pahlavid era. This 'esoteric mysticism' was an internal and individualist phenomenon, and its aim was to accomplish a union of science, technology and an individualist ethic. Hence, by the time of the 1979 Revolution, the reputation of mysticism had to some extent been tarnished as pro-imperial and anti-revolutionary (Bos 2007: 64–65). By contrast, top clerics of the anti-monarchical seminaries, most notably Khomeini himself, increasingly argued for an affirmative, socially-engaged mysticism on Shiite grounds. Accordingly, the three principles of guidance, education and guardianship [*hidāyat, tarbiyat, vilāyat*] constitute the fundamentals on which a politicised, activist form of mysticism could stand against the oppressive monarchy. These clerics were among the ideological founders of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and their conception of revolutionary, social mysticism shaped the intellectual climate in the 1980s. A crucial inspiration for Soroush, especially in his early phase of intellectual development, and an outstanding student of Khomeini who followed, expanded and elaborated the teachings of his master about social mysticism, was Mutahhari. He delineated the major characteristics of the issue in his works, especially in the third volume of his lectures on the philosophy of history, under the curious rubric of 'mystical socialism' (Mutahhari 2003: 3.318–20). Preoccupied with an understanding of the history of mysticism through the lens of Ibn Arabi's (d.1240) speculative metaphysics, Mutahhari enumerated the characteristics of mystical socialism, which included the transfiguration of multiple 'I's into 'we' as an ethical principle, the pursuance of the golden rule, the annihilation of egoism, the cultivation of an interior sense of liberty through detachment, and concurrently an element of attachment around which a community can unify (Mutahhari 2003). The seeds of a non-categorical distinction between Sufism and mysticism in Soroush's approach to religion were conceived in the 1970s when his views about 'Islamic Sciences' were firmly rooted in the narrative that Mutahhari as a public figure was producing. As we will notice through multiple examples, the distinction that preserves a positive denotation of the term 'mysticism', whereas 'Sufism' conveys a pejorative tone, has been reflected in Soroush's works in his different phases of intellectual development.

This is the socio-political background on which Soroush developed over several decades his ideas about religion, Sufism and mysticism. It is his second, modernist standpoint, however, that has earned Soroush his global reputation. Beginning in the late 1980s, he argued that religious knowledge, including mysticism, undergoes contraction and expansion in each era. As he writes in *The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of the Sharia* [*Qabz va Bast-i Te'urik-i Shari'at*], 'non-religious knowledge does have an undeniable impact on religious knowledge and the development and change in one will result in development and change in the other' (Soroush 1991: 167). As a modernist theologian and philosopher of religion, Soroush defends: (1) adopting a minimalistic approach to religious knowledge as a form of searching for truth along with other non-religious sciences; (2) freely criticising the produced religious knowledge, because all of it is a human effort. It is fallible, entirely humane—thus, it can progress only through critical engagement rather than the sacralisation of it; and (3) as the totalitarian claims for preaching or accessing the ultimate truth have no rational basis, the direct political implication is a fierce critique of the religious state, and a defence of pluralistic, liberal political structures. Soroush argues that the religious state not only adopts a maximalist approach by assuming that religious knowledge can guide politics, but it also becomes un-Islamic precisely because of its dictation of a single interpretation of religiosity upon society. Inescapably it will become tyranny, which is the most cardinal sin in Quranic language and classical Islamic political theories. The best way to allow the flourishing of multiple interpretations is a liberal society, and ideally a secular political structure where no interpretation of religion prevails or has a final say. In other words, Soroush's analysis yields a sacral defence of secularism, which is also often called religious secularity (Sadri 2001; Fletcher 2005; Ghobadza-deh 2015: 25–26; Hashas 2014).

The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of the Sharia thus historicised religious knowledge, while Soroush's later book published in 1999, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, historicised religion as well, which caused even more controversy. This process of interpretation, historical conditioning and human contribution entered into the birth moment of Islam, that is, to the revelation of the Quran as well. This birth moment was a mystical experience, and the Quran, as 'The Word of Muhammad', was the record of the authentic mystical experiences of the Prophet through his seventh century CE Arabic tongue and his own conceptual interpretation of this historical, contextual process. Hence, religion since its moment of birth becomes a historical project that is based

on human interpretation of a mystical experience called revelation (see Shadi 2018; Soroush 2007b): 'Islam is nothing but a series of interpretations of Islam' (Soroush 2009b: 14; cf. Hashas 2014).

It is obvious that the two intellectual standpoints of modernism and theology aligned with different political positions. Besides, more tactically, they also tailored major yet incompatible roles for mysticism to play. With the end of the 1980s, in connection with his political inclinations, Soroush's understanding of mysticism would increasingly move away from the activist and social forms towards the experientialist language of a liberalist individualism. At this point, the concept of 'Sufism' would become visible in his writings, mostly as the embodiment of what mysticism should *not* become. In the next section we will pay closer attention to this politicised process whereby the distinction between the two concepts becomes visible.

From Social Mysticism to Individualism

In the analysis of the intellectual odyssey Soroush underwent, especially in his reception of premodern Sufi literature, we discern at least two rather distinct phases connected via a transition period. These two phases are separated from each other by a few characteristics despite some common, repetitive elements observers may find in both periods. In the first phase, which can be traced in the early days of the 1979 revolution, we face Soroush as someone who approaches mysticism through the lens of a Shiite, conservative Islamist. Among the works of his early phase, *A Passage to the Divine Manufacture [Tafarru-i Šun']* firmly connects his Islamist ideas with his understanding of mysticism, and represents his reflections upon humanities as a set of academic disciplines. Here he argues that the prominence of mysticism and a 'full-fledged mystical anthropology' in 'the Orient' is one of the main reasons why Europeans could not appreciate the humanities developed in Iran (Soroush 1987 [2006]: 7–8). In this book, Soroush is still a preacher and ideologue for the Islamic Republic who understands mysticism as a social drive that mobilises a community around the character of a charismatic spiritual leader, in this case Khomeini. He also claims that a sense of wholly otherness and incomprehensibility of the Orient can be found in the 'mystical states of Imam Khomeini' as both the political and spiritual leader (Soroush 1987 [2006]: 55).

In this period, the mystical notion of 'unification and unity between the worshipper and the worshipped' is of utmost importance in his works—an importance that will be eclipsed in the second phase. The

overwhelming call for unification between the worshipper and the worshiped manifested in a mass devotion to the character of a spiritual, charismatic leader encapsulates Soroush's understanding of the role that social mysticism plays in the mobilisation of religion to achieve a socio-political common and communal objective:

Being a spectator is the main function of a philosopher but when it comes to faith and mysticism, being an actor lies at the centre. A mystic is not a spectator in this world and here lies the main difference between philosophy and mysticism... Philosophers endeavour to understand the mystery and the Creator of being... But mystics undergo the bitterness of the beautiful Beloved dearly, becoming involved in a love affair with Him. It is within this love affair as an actor that they reach the knowledge of the Worshiped. To know the religious and philosophical terminology does not mean faith and mysticism... but to enter God in the heart, ... and the unification of the worshipper and the worshipped... is the exact same knowledge and the birth of mysticism (Soroush 1987 [2006]: 34).

Curiously, throughout the work, the term 'mysticism' is the only phrase he uses to refer to the esoteric dimension of Islam, and the term 'Sufism', as far as we have succeeded to pursue, does not appear even once.

Among Soroush's theoretical and popular works, *Broader than Ideology* [*Farbihtar az Ideology*] and *The Attributes of the Pious* [*Avşāf-i Pārsāyān*] particularly represent a turning point in his approach towards Sufism and mysticism. The turning point between phases one and two happens sometime in the early 1990s, which is concurrent with the aftermath of the death of Khomeini in 1989. Whereas *Broader than Ideology* demonstrates a general theoretical shift in his worldview, *The Attributes of the Pious* declares the beginning of a transition in his understanding of Sufism and mysticism. In this work, the term 'Sufism' begins to appear in conjunction with the term 'mysticism' (Soroush 1992: 352). 'Sufism' carries clearly negative connotations, and 'mysticism' attains these negative connotations the more (and only if) it accepts the institutional, social and intellectual inclinations and attributes that Soroush ascribes to Sufism. This is another clear indication of how he discriminately valorises the terms to reinforce an individualised understanding of religion by prioritising a non-institutional mysticism over its rivals. In this post-Khomeinian phase, mysticism, along with theology, interpretation and ethics, are platforms for the understanding of the sharia (Soroush 1991: 188–89). Soroush presents the confrontation between exoteric legalist religion and mystical religion as well as the distinction between the realms of philosophy and

mysticism via ideal types (e.g., Soroush 2001d: 43). He emphasises the necessity of a clear demarcation between philosophy on the one hand, and mysticism as Sufism on the other:

Metaphysical philosophies that were blended with mysticism, which became prevalent since the 16th century among us, failed to realize their illuminative and monumental role. Some make a separation between philosophy on the one hand, and logic and reason on the other, so that they took its benefits and fiddled the ruptures and lacerations of analytic philosophy with the nail of Sufism. In this way, they exposed the kindled lamp of philosophical reason to the storm of mysticism. To mix philosophy and mysticism benefits neither, and above all, it is not possible to blend these two (Soroush 2001a: 167).

In spite of the demarcations between philosophy on the one side and esoteric Islam on the other, the juxtaposition of mystics and Sufis interchangeably and synonymously remains common specifically in the second phase (Soroush 1990b; Soroush 2001b: 18; Soroush 2018). Nonetheless, there are still some occasions where Soroush makes differentiations, however implicit, between the two terms. In the first phase, where he was more inclined to be nurtured by a communal, institutional understanding of knowledge which was rooted in Shiite literature and the teachings of the Shiite leaders, the term ‘mysticism’ was prevalent (Soroush 1992: 5; Soroush 2001c: 71). In the second phase in the 1990s, however, the two terms commonly come on scene together, and at this point what is more ‘positive’ for him about mysticism (and only derivatively, about Sufism) is its experiential, individual, knowledge-based, ‘spiritual’ aspect (cf. Foody 2015: 601–17).

Critique of Sufism

It might sound surprising for a scholar who depicts himself as a follower of Rumi, but Soroush actually has a negative view of Sufism. His critique is generic and ahistorical, yet multifaceted. First, as we observe in *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, his project of historicising religion in addition to religious knowledge finds itself in conflict with the generic Muslim tendency to glorify the Prophet. Soroush argues that the humanness of the Prophet, and hence, the human contribution in, and the historicity of, the divine word was neglected in the Islamic heritage due to the mystification of Mohammad’s personality. He thinks that Sufism has played a significant role in this particular theological problem (see Shadi 2018: 114–35). Second, with its purported tendency to deny free-will,

Sufism has historically been fatalistic according to Soroush. It lacks an emphasis on individual freedom and free-will as a major theological deficiency from his liberal perspective (Soroush 2007a). Third, he criticises Sufis for their anti-social, ritualistic and world-rejecting deeds and activities such as celibacy, self-abasement, self-humiliation and ascetism (Soroush 1992: 352–53). All of these are also major differences between ‘mysticism’ and ‘Sufism’ for Soroush; the latter is primarily other-worldly, and hence, seclusive and world-denying, while the former can potentially affirm both this world and the other world, both matter and soul. Hence ‘the world-flight ideology of the Sufis’ makes it difficult to develop an ethics that can embrace both (see Shadi 2018: 114–35; Soroush 2009c: 182; Madaninejad 2011: 75–76). For example, Sufism typically teaches ‘that worldly wealth is a punishment for sins inflicted on the sinner before his death’ (Soroush 2000: 43). With its ascetism, Sufism makes social development and prosperity a serious ethical problem insofar as it prescribes ‘austerity and world abnegation’ (Soroush 2000: 46). By affirming the world without fetishising it, mysticism has two wings allowing it to fly, while Sufism has a single wing and lacks that important ethical balance.

In this list of critical weaknesses of Sufism, which is a long one, the major item worth a longer discussion is a purported anti-intellectualism. This is yet another point of demarcation between Sufism and mysticism repeated in his oeuvre. The following passage probably offers one of the most explicit instances:

Islamic *mystics* have uttered marvellous points about acquiring knowledge. Sometimes it looks like they have disagreed with the acquisition of knowledge whereas that is not the case. Yes, there were some *Sufis* who disagreed on literacy. Yet we do not remember them, and we remember the great ones who tasted a sip from the ocean of Islamic knowledge (Soroush 1992: 88; emphases added).

Sufism is depicted by Soroush as a form of religiosity that does not put reason at its core, but questions its veracity in the first place. This scepticism opens unique possibilities to Sufis for Soroush, but also creates a perpetual conflict between different approaches to religion. These three influential modes of classical interpretation are represented by philosophers, theologians and mystics. Philosophers took causal relations seriously and encouraged the study of natural phenomena as a proof for the divine and guidance for the production of religious knowledge. Theologians, too, would pay rigorous attention to logical reasoning insofar as demonstrative sciences were vital in the

development of religious knowledge. Sufism, however, was based on the science of mysticism that aimed to read phenomena as manifestations of ultimate truth, while they would dismiss the causal relations in the natural world, or the logical demonstrations. Hence the three approaches were modes of religious knowledge that were in continuous conflict (Soroush 2018). To put it differently, the problem of Sufism was its dismissive attitude towards reasoning and rational sciences (see Soroush 2009c: 149–51). Soroush criticised even his beloved mentors, Rumi and Hafez (d.1389), at this point (Soroush 2000: 93). Reason provides an external freedom from bondage, from submission to external authority of any kind. Yet a bird with one wing cannot fly; reason freeing us from external bondage should be united with individual mysticism that will free us from the bondage of lowly, material desires and internal authorities and idols:

What we desperately need today is to take our cue from the seekers of freedom and from our own religious and mystic culture, to combine external and internal freedoms: the freedom predicated on submission and the submission predicated on freedom. We must tie these two together and desire them at once. We must not elevate one at the expense of the other. The bird that has been flying on one wing must be blessed with two wings in order to reach the nest of bliss (Soroush 2000: 104).

From Soroush's perspective, the Sufi tradition has the essential problem of trying to fly with a single wing by emphasising spiritual liberation and neglecting civil liberation. Seeing the glass half-full, Soroush concludes that Sufism still has a key role to play today. As it promotes internal freedom and morality, it can provide answers to our modern excesses and dilemmas, by 'teaching humility and rejecting avarice (*and even an excessive avarice for knowledge*), and by restraining "the pleasure principle" and bolstering the "quest for virtue"' (Soroush 2004; emphasis added; cf. Matin-Asgari 1997: 102–103). In brief, Soroush has a much more positive conception of mysticism compared to Sufism, and the two get mixed especially in English translations, as both are often translated as 'Sufism'. The form of mysticism that Soroush endorses is the individualist '*irfān*' rather than the institutional, organised *taṣawwuf* of Sufi orders [*ṭarīqas*]. It is only normal that the representatives of organised Sufism in Iran, in turn, can be sceptical on Soroush's expertise in, and understanding of, Sufism (Bos 2007: 70).

Ideal Types and Essentialism

As his ahistorical and decontextualised references to Sufism betray, Soroush's notions of religion and mysticism have always suffered from chronic essentialism since the dawn of the first phase of his thought (see Soroush 1996: 116, 135). A full-fledged dependence on a small group of textual materials through an essentialist approach that neglects or ignores multiplicity, discrepancies and historical transfigurations over time in no small extent characterises Soroush's approach to Sufism and mysticism. Throughout his works, he predominantly focuses on a handful of classical figures in the history of Sufism, most notably Rumi and al-Ghazali (d.1111), without any endeavour to unravel the dynamics and tensions between Sufi ideas, figures and institutions that led to the constitution of the classical works of Sufism. Curiously, when he sets out to depict the fundamentals of a Popperian approach to experience, he is aware enough to take advantage of the Popperian notion of refutability as an antidote for both essentialism and instrumentalism (Soroush 1988: 54). Yet when he enters the study of Sufism and mysticism, all those premises and preparations to prevent essentialism melt into air. Examples for a widespread essentialist language are abundant in his corpus. To mention but one, we can refer to the afore-mentioned binary opposition he makes between philosophers and mystics:

mystics have said that to be in such a world [the world of divine presence] is possible for humankind. And such a world should not be easily and cheaply exchanged with the second world, namely that of philosophical disentanglements (Soroush 1996: 32–33).

The ubiquity of ideal types and unjustifiable overgeneralisations lead to an essentialism where the absence of historicity arguably injures Soroush's analysis of not only Sufism and mysticism, but religion in general (e.g., Soroush 2001a: 167). The ideal types are predominantly based on a binary opposition between reason and perplexity or acquired knowledge and mystical manifestation (Soroush 1996: 38).

His 'three types of religiosity' (Soroush 2001a: 142 onwards; Madaninejad 2011: 75–80) is another key point that differentiates Sufism and mysticism through associating them with different ideal types. These three types of religiosity according to Soroush are:

1. pragmatic/instrumental;
2. discursive/reflective; and
3. experiential.

In the first type, which is also characterised as ‘popular teleological religiosity’, the telos or outcome of a belief and practice is at the centre. This first type for Soroush (2001a: 144–45) is ‘trivial (i.e., irrational), hereditary, deterministic, emotional, dogmatic, ritualistic, ideological, identity-based, superficial, communal, legalistic, mythical, imitative, devotional, traditional and habitual’. In the articulation of his examples of instrumental type and experience-based type of religiosity, Soroush accompanies Sufism with asceticism rather than mysticism. Sufism and asceticism, exemplified by the famous Abdullah Ansari (d.1089), are representatives of this instrumental religiosity wherein the clerics and intermediaries emphasise submission, imitation and religious zeal. In this type of religiosity to which Sufism belongs, even the Prophet emerges as the commander of the good and forbidding of the evil, rather than the revelatory mystic who undergoes sublime mystical experiences (Soroush 2001a: 145–46).

Soroush’s second ideal type of religiosity is the scholarly, discursive religiosity that is, unlike the popular type, not happy with myths, imitation and blind emotions. In this discursive type, religion is rather the servant of politics, revolution and power (Soroush 2001a: 147). It is, however, through the third type of religiosity that he succeeds to provide the audience with his articulation of normative mysticism through an experientialist understanding of religion:

When it comes to the experience-based religiosity, leaving the stage of separation, we enter the stage of union. The first two types of religiosity are based on separation. The first one is bodily and practical, whereas the second one is intellectual and rational... experience-based religiosity is neither bodily nor intellectual, neither instrumental nor practical, but pursues the known and whereas the discursive deals primarily with hearing, the experience-based deals with seeing... experiential religiosity is a love-based, revelatory, experiential, certain, individual, deterministic, core-directed, peaceful, delightful, union-based, intuitive, sanctified, mystical, and mysterious. Here God is a beautiful beloved, a dearly loved one, the prophet is a master, a man of spirit and a successful role model for religious experiences. To follow him means to share his tastes, and to develop and repeat his experiences (Soroush 2001a: 154).

In this way, Soroush’s distinction of three ideal types of religiosity creates an essentialising split between Sufism and mysticism. As we can notice clearly in this classification, the experiential type of religiosity, which is represented by mystics, supersedes the type of religiosity, namely the more communal and the more ritualised one, that is shared among Sufis and ascetics.

Jamesian Experientialism and the Politics of Imagining Iran

The experiential and revelatory quality Soroush ascribes to mysticism and mystics is foundational to his general understanding of religion. In order for us to acquire a better understanding of how he grasps mysticism via the ideas of religious and mystical experiences, it is helpful to take a look at the way in which he integrates mystical experience and prophetic experience. Time and again, mystics of the world are mentioned hand in hand with prophets in his works (Soroush 2001e: 58). In the articulation of his viewpoint about the interconnectedness between mystical and prophetic experience or even perhaps to emphasise their identity, Soroush (e.g., 2007b) does not make an essential differentiation between the prophetic experience of revelation and the mystical experiences claimed by mystics and even by poets. In the transformative experiences of the prophets and mystics, there is a difference in intensity and, maybe more importantly, in the socially engaged project that accompanies the experience. A prophet emerges from the experience as a new person with an ethical, revolutionary world-building project while mystics do not develop such social transformative missions. Soroush (2009c: 5) cites the prominent Sufi Abd al-Quddus Gangohi (d.1537) to make his point. While the legal, missionary element can become extinct, the mystical experience itself, with its noetic quality, does persist, and is accessible to all human beings of all times. There is no qualitative difference between the prophetic and mystical experiences; the well-known saying goes, ‘Sufis are the heirs of the Prophets’, as Soroush attests (Soroush 2001e: 61). Sufis, to be precise, are the heirs of the Prophets as long as they remain individual mystics without institutional aspirations or socio-political projects, unlike their progenitors.

As we can witness clearly, there is a common ground in the description of both mystical and prophetic experiences that allows Soroush to expand his understanding of the former to the latter. This depiction of mysticism as the individualist, experiential and universal essence of authentic religiosity, and religious institutions as social, thus, secondary and derivative, has the clear mark of William James’s (d.1910) celebrated lectures titled *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Interestingly, Soroush gives no direct citation of, or remark on, James, and alleges that his approach is inspired by a Popperian understanding of experience (Soroush 1988: 21–28). The unmistakably Jamesian tone in his conceptions of religion, religious experience and mysticism is presumably transferred to his intellectual constellation via W. T. Stace (d.1967) and others who adopted James’s deeply influential perspective. Stace’s

monograph, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, was translated into Persian at the dawn of the 1979 revolution and ever since has been cited by Iranian intellectuals and scholars of mysticism including Soroush (2001b: 11; Stace 1980: 126). In his book, Stace (1961: 20, 35, 42, 67) refers several times to James. As for the impact of Stace's Jamesian approach on Soroush, the following passage delicately demonstrates Soroush's indebtedness to the articulation of the introverted mystical experiences and mysticism presented by Stace. Here, the relationship between a mystic and the divine is enunciated by Soroush via the language of experience and interpretation:

When God becomes the subject of introverted mystical experiences in the presentation and interpretation of these mystics, He manifests Himself to a human being as a mirror. In this mirror, one can see oneself (Soroush 2001d: 42).

In this way, as one expects from a Jamesian attitude towards mysticism, Sufism is observed by Soroush via lenses that prioritise the individual over the communal, the sensual over the ritual, and so on. Not surprisingly, then, the entire history of Sufism for him is reduced to that of ideas, while Sufi social institutions, organisations and practices are largely forgotten, and more importantly, dismissed as secondary, imitative, ritualistic and inauthentic. If mysticism contains a legitimate political power for Soroush, this comes from its privatisation through individual, internal experiences in solitude. Its social formation or institutionalisation creates religious authority for submission or blind imitation of what was originally an authentic religious experience, as he says in an interview:

We need to remember that Sufism also has in it a strong authoritarian strain which was manifested on many occasions in the past. Due to the lopsided development that we see in the Muslim world today, where states are given so much power at the expense of the people, any attempt to translate Sufism into politics will most likely lead to an authoritarian form of rule. The case of the *vilāyat-i faqīh* [guardianship of jurists] in Iran is a good example—it was a concept that originated from Sufi discourse. In the past we have seen many attempts to do this as well, when Muslim rulers chose the discourse of Sufism as a discourse of legitimization for their regimes. It led to the emergence of authoritarian rulers who were regarded as *valīs* [spiritual leaders] instead (Soroush 2003).

It is worth emphasising that the phrase 'guardianship' was not only core to Khomeini's political ideology, but also to the social mysticism

associated with it. Thus, Soroush's critique of such institutional mysticism targets not only Sufism, but also the political agenda of the Islamic reform. The liberal, secularist political project that he has been envisaging since the 1990s, then, has no room for Sufism or the Shiite version of social mysticism proper, while an individualist form of mysticism plays a key role in it.

Incidentally, Soroush's call for the depoliticisation of Sufism and mysticism as a personal political force is paradoxically accompanied by occasional critique of a purported Sufi political quietism that has allegedly failed to do justice to 'external freedom'. Accordingly, 'the problem with what our Sufis did in the past is that they exclusively thought of internal freedom, and did not take external freedom seriously' (Soroush 1992: 396). In another passage in the same work, he chastises the early Sufi al-Bistami (d.874) for being quiet and neglectful regarding social challenges (Soroush 1992: 282–84). In both cases, Soroush adopts the terms 'Sufi' and 'Sufism', rather than mysticism, in his critique of socio-political quietism.

Apart from these critical passages, in the second phase of his intellectual development he unhesitatingly prefers to keep Sufism away from not only politics, but the mainstream of society. Published in 2001, *The Ethics of the Gods* [*Akhlāq-i Khudāyān*] is the place where he makes the point most forcefully (Soroush 2001a). Such global yet sharp critique notwithstanding, all Sufis discussed by Soroush relate to his native geographies. Like Khomeini, all mystics Soroush discusses belong to the Greater Iran, together with the ecumenical master, Ibn Arabi (cf. Knysh 1992). In other words, he understands mysticism and Sufism predominantly within the boundaries of historical Iran as an imagined, persistent community. This imagined nation produced both Sufis (or ascetics) of the inferior kind, and the mystics of the superior kind. *The Ethics of the Gods* is also a good example of this mild nationalist project. Starting with a rhetorical question, 'who are we Iranians', Soroush enumerates the constituting components of the Iranian culture where we find Sufism in both ascetic and mystical types: al-Ghazali is depicted as a major Persian Sufi who founded 'fearful and ascetic Sufism', and Rumi, 'the great Sufi-minded figure [*mutaṣavvif*]' and poet who should be considered the founder of the Sufism of love' (Soroush 2001a: 161–66; Soroush 2014). In this mild nationalist project, Rumi stands out as 'the most important and influential Sufi or mystic in Iranian-Islamic culture' who built his edifice of Sufism consciously on the basis of love in opposition to fear or asceticism (Soroush 1999: 10; Soroush in Fletcher 2005: 551).

It should be noted that in more recent years, specifically after he was forced to live a life as an expatriate in exile in the United States since the 2000s, Soroush has increasingly distanced himself from such a nationalist attitude towards mysticism in favour of universalism (Soroush 2009a). Accordingly, mystics like Rumi are representative of universal values that transcend not only national identities, but also sectarian divides. This removal of Rumi as an individual mystic from any institutional or sectarian context or affiliation, on the other hand, strongly resonates not only with his liberal political project and Jamesian conception of religiosity, but aligns more directly with the sectarian dimension of his mild nationalism. Here, particular historical figures like Rumi and Hafez emerge as universal Persian mystics only through the removal of the Sunni elements of their heritage. Thus, the promotion of a privatised mysticism in a Shiite imagined community is coloured by the depiction of Sufism as an inferior, Sunni institution.

It is particularly Soroush's comparative analysis of al-Ghazali's *The Revival of Religious Sciences* and Fayz Kashani's (d.1680) redaction titled *The Refinement of the Revival* that illuminates this sectarian dimension of the imagined Iranian culture and of the demarcation of mysticism and Sufism. Published in 1994, this essay enunciates how Fayz disrobes al-Ghazali's *Revival* of the two garments of Sunnism and Sufism and puts on a mantle of mystical Shiism (Soroush 1989: 5). At this point, the employment of the designation 'mysticism' delineates how Soroush occasionally follows the tradition among the esoteric-minded Shiite scholars who decided to replace Sufism with mysticism through the process in which the Sunni elements were carefully removed. Besides, this occasional differentiation between mysticism and Sufism helps Soroush criticise some ascetic rituals associated with Sufism (Soroush 1989: 4–6). In the description of Fayz's critiques of *The Revival*, Soroush's language is unmistakably sympathetic towards Fayz if not quite endorsing (Soroush 1989: 8–9). Additionally, the terms 'Sufi' and 'Sufism' at times echo antinomianism and non-conformity. These are the elements that are by no means convenient for Soroush to support (Soroush 1989: 10–11 and 18). Furthermore, in his report concerning al-Ghazali's critique of arrogance and ignorance, Soroush consistently uses the terms 'Sufis', 'Sufi path' and 'Sufism', as another indication that they bear negative connotations for him (Soroush 1989: 44). In his comparison between al-Ghazali and Fayz, in other words, we can notice the sectarian genealogy of his political differentiation of mysticism and Sufism. Siding with Fayz, Soroush reverberates the demarcation between the two terms, a demarcation that had already

been perpetuated among both Shiite theologians and some Islamic modernists (Soroush 1989: 48–50).

Conclusion

In this article, we have analysed the politicised demarcations of Sufism and mysticism in the thought of Soroush from a religious studies perspective. We have shown that his understanding of Sufism has been largely interconnected with the political agenda that he pursued over time. We have observed that the concept of ‘Sufism’ emerged in his thought in the late 1980s as an ideal type along with the concept of mysticism that allowed Soroush to pursue multi-layered projects. These projects include a liberal Islam where the privatisation of religion through mysticism plays a key role, and a mild nationalist project where the concept of ‘mysticism’ is universalised in order to imagine a predominantly Shiite Iranian community that is in conversation with mysticisms of other religious traditions. His political project is also in tandem with, and encouraging of, a depoliticised, individualised and textualist understanding of mysticism. His reading of Sufism, which suffers from a chronic essentialism, is through ideal types, and his ahistorical and restricted understanding of mysticism, which is mostly based upon a handful of selected Sufi texts, follows an early twentieth-century Jamesian experientialism. From a broader perspective, the intellectual odyssey of Soroush reminds us that native definitions of concepts like ‘Sufism’ and ‘mysticism’ fit into political agendas and intellectual orientations that are unfixed and negotiated among agents, as in the case of modern Iran.

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