

Adoration in Islamic Mystical Tradition

Like many other religious traditions, Islam embodies a very rich and diverse mystical tradition. The mystics of Islam are called Sufis. There is some difference of opinion on the etymology of the word. It is said that the early mystics of eighth century Arabia were called Sufis because they wore woolen clothes (Suf means wool in Arabic). Others have speculated that the early mystics of Islam were called Sufis as they tried to purify themselves (the word Safa' means purity).

It was during the Umayyad dynasty in the eighth century that a distinct group of mystics emerged. The worldly outlook of the Umayyad rulers, the rapid expansion of the Islamic empire in the first century of Islam and a general disdain of religious principles led many Muslims to feel that the ideals and values established by the Prophet Muhammad had been destroyed by the ruling elite. This was a major factor that precipitated a group of piety minded people, the early mystics of Islam.

The Sufis trace the genesis of their esoteric views to the Qur'an, the Muslim scripture. The Qur'an mentions many verses that have mystical connotations. For example, it states: "Wherever you turn, you will find the face of God." (2:115) "We are closer to human beings than their own jugular veins." (50:17) "He is with you wherever you may be." (57:4) "Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth." (24:35). Such verses encouraged the Sufis' quest for the divine.

Sufis demonstrate many of the hallmarks characteristic of holy men in other religious traditions. The Sufi holy man (also called shaykh) undergoes a profound religious experience, enabling him to have intimate communion with the divine in an intensive and

personal way. He also performs excessive acts of asceticism, renunciation, self-mortification and other devotional exercises.

In the Sufi understanding of creation, the supreme deity was a hidden treasure that wished to be known. God's hidden treasure can become manifest through the perfection of the self, for it is believed that the divine attributes are reflected in human beings. According to Rumi, a famous mystic of the thirteenth century, human beings were created to manifest the divine attributes that lie within them. Otherwise, he asks poignantly, if there had been no desire and hope for the fruit why did the gardener plant the tree?

The Sufi interpretation of the story of creation as told by the Qur'an also envisages human beings as having been separated from their origin which lies in the spiritual realm. Earthly position is to merely manifest the inherent hidden treasures, attain perfection and return to the original spiritual state. A human being's sole purpose is to reflect the divine attributes inherent in him and to fully realize all the possibilities of the human state returning ultimately, to the macrocosm. Once it entered the terrestrial realm, the spirit became so engrossed with worldly pursuits that it forgot its spiritual origins and its pact with God to worship the only one God. Whereas most of us consider ourselves as human beings who sometimes undergo a spiritual experience, for the Sufis we are actually spiritual beings who are undergoing a transient human experience.

It is in this context that we can comprehend the Sufi quest to experience God in the present world, to feel His majestic presence and to remove the veils that separate human from the divine. This mystical quest precipitated the concept of adoring God. Adoration of God, in Islamic mysticism, takes many forms. These range from various

forms of ascetic exercises, self-mortification, vigils, protracted prayers, meditation to emulating the spiritual exercises of the Prophet Muhammad.

For the Sufis, an important method of experiencing the divine is by emulating the Muhammadan paradigm in their practices. These holy men try to replicate in their own life a sense of the spiritual experience of the Prophet himself. They model their inner and outward behavior on the Prophet, exemplifying his every act. This includes patterning his outer behavior, imitating his spiritual exercises as well as his reported inner states. Such modeling became an important medium for the Sufis to link themselves to the Prophet through a spiritual paradigm. As the spiritual heir to the Prophet, the Sufi exemplifies the living paradigm of the prophetic ideal. Emulating the Prophet in every possible way was an indispensable means to attaining holiness and experiencing the divine in the same way that the Prophet had. For the Sufis, the virtues of the Prophet are visible in the holy man as a mirror. Due to him, contemporary Muslims can somehow experience Muhammad's character and charisma.

In this brief paper, I am not able to adumbrate the various expressions of adoration in the mystical tradition of Islam. Here, I will only discuss a few of them. The most famous form of adoration is a mystical exercise called *dhikr*. This refers to the systematic repetition of God's names so as to attain continuous awareness of God's presence. *Dhikr* entails perpetual chanting of one of God's various names. Whether done in solitude or in congregation, *dhikr* is often accompanied with head and body movements and can culminate in a Sufi entering a trance.

Dhikr can be performed silently or loudly and is practiced at any time or place, for the Sufis maintain that the heart of the faithful must be "perfumed with the recollection of

God” following a tradition in which God says, “I am the companion of one who remembers Me.”

Dhikr is also seen as performing the important function of inculcating the love for the divine in a Sufi. This is predicated on the view that love for a person implies the repetition of his name and remembering him continuously. Other Sufis compare the heart to a tree which lives and moves only by the breeze of love and is nourished by the water of *dhikr* indicating thereby the growing presence of the divine in the heart.

Some Sufis prescribe special body positions when undertaking *dhikr*, the correct position (cross-legged) is considered to be important (but not essential) in the successful performance of *dhikr*. To have the desired effect, *dhikr* must permeate the mystic's whole being, he must forget all other objects and thoughts. It is to be noted that although *dhikr* is directly related to a mental state (since only God is required to be in the mind) no specific formula is prescribed for restricting the constant movements in the mind (unlike the Yogic case where the mind is trained so as to concentrate on a single object). The emphasis in *dhikr* is more on being so absorbed by God that everything else becomes insignificant. To quote Shaykh al-'Alawi, a twentieth century Sufi master, through the *dhikr*:

“...the spirit of the disciple would quickly reach beyond the created universe provided that he had sufficient preparation and aptitude.... The disciple was submerged in the world of the Absolute and his certainty was strengthened by Its Pure Light.”

Dhikr can also engender ecstatic feelings leading to the dissolution of the distinction between the subject and object. True *dhikr*, it is said, is that you forget your *dhikr*. Other developed forms of *dhikr* show some rudimentary forms of breath control whereby every intake or outlet of breath is to be accompanied by God's recollection.

Some forms of retention of breath was encouraged but unlike the Yogic practices, the Sufis never saw breath controlling exercises as an essential part in the *dhikr* sessions

The Sufi adoration of God is also expressed by the *salat* (ritual prayer) which is, in fact, the second pillar of Islam. The early Sufis saw the prayer, in accordance with a prophetic tradition, as a spiritual ascension bringing the Sufi into an immediate presence of God. The Sufis internalized this important ritual creating, in the process, feelings of awe in themselves.

Many Sufis report ecstatic feelings in their prayers. Prayer is seen as an intimate conversation between the human and the divine. This also engendered the night prayers in mystical circles. Hasan b. 'Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, was asked why those who pray at night are most beautiful in appearance? He replied: "Because they are alone with the All-Merciful who covers them with light from His light."

True mystical prayers reflect trust in and love for God and inculcate the idea of loving God for His own sake (rather than for attaining heaven or escaping hell). The essence of prayer is therefore attaining close proximity to God and adoring His majesty. In Rumi's view, absorption in the Divine Unity is the soul of prayer.

The most controversial Sufi meditational exercise has been the *sama'* (musical sessions). Apart from the methodical chanting accompanying the music, *sama'* also involves mystical dances. *Sama'* is only practiced at the higher levels of the *tariqa* (the Sufi path) and is also capable of enrapturing a mystic and generating extreme forms of ecstasy in him. At this stage the Sufi 'finds' God as he is enraptured in the divine bliss. In Rumi's view, *sama'* is the "attempt to break the fetters of the body so that the soul is set free."

The Sufis see the *sama'* as being capable of arousing in the participant a desire for the Beloved, moved by the spirit's desire to return to its heavenly origin. *Sama'* is also seen as an inspiration stirring the heart to truth, being beneficial to him whose heart is alive and whose lower soul is dead.

The foregoing discussion suggests that the purpose of the various exercises has been to attain a closer awareness of God's presence and to induce ecstatic moments in the mystic's life. The Sufi practices range from extreme self-mortification (in the form of lengthy vigils and fasts) to *dhikr*, which inculcates the continuous remembrance of and complete absorption in God. The *sama'* sessions further develop extreme ecstatic states. The underlying motive for all the forms of exercises is to adore God and to establish a mystical relationship with Him. The search for the divine is accompanied by long and rigorous exercises for internal purification conjoined with continuous remembrance of God. Through *dhikr* and *sama'*, the Sufis obliterate all objects, with only God pervading the mind. It must be noted that nowhere does Sufism give detailed expositions on how the external distractions are to be effaced from the mind. The emphasis lies more on the inculcation of the divine presence in the mind so that everything else is deemed to be unworthy of contemplation and consideration.

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