

Mystical Philosophy in Islam

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Mystical philosophy has an intimate connection with the mainstream of Islamic philosophy. It consists of several main strands, ranging from Isma'ili thought to the metaphysics of al-Ghazali and Ibn al-'Arabi, and with a continuing powerful presence in the contemporary Islamic world. Although mystical thinkers were aware that they were advocating an approach to thinking and knowledge which differed from much of the Peripatetic tradition, they constructed a systematic approach which was often continuous with that tradition. On the whole they emphasized the role of intellectual intuition in our approach to understanding reality, and sought to show how such an understanding might be put on a solid conceptual basis. The ideas that they created were designed to throw light on the nature of the inner sense of Islam.

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Mystical philosophy as Islamic philosophy .1

It is important at the outset to ask what is meant by mystical philosophy in the context of the Islamic philosophical tradition. The term in Arabic closest to the phrase 'mystical philosophy' would perhaps be al-hikmat al-dhawqiyya, literally 'tasted philosophy or wisdom', which etymologically corresponds exactly to sapience from the Latin root sapere, meaning to taste. As understood in English, however, the term 'mystical philosophy' would include other types of thought in the Islamic context, although al-hikmat al-dhawqiyya was at its heart. Al-hikmat al-dhawqiyya is usually contrasted with discursive philosophy, or al-hikmat al-bahthiyya. Mystical philosophy in Islam would have to include all intellectual perspectives, which consider not only reason but also the heart-intellect, in fact primarily the latter as the main instrument for the gaining of knowledge. If this definition is accepted, then most schools of Islamic philosophy had a mystical element, for there was rarely a rationalistic philosophy developed in Islam which remained impervious to the distinction between reason and the intellect (as nous or intellectus) and the primacy of the latter while rejecting altogether the role of the heart-intellect in gaining

knowledge.

This entry concentrates on those schools which not only include but emphasize noesis and the role of the heart-intellect or illumination in the attainment of knowledge. We shall therefore leave aside the Peripatetic school, despite the mystical elements in certain works of al-Farabi, the 'oriental philosophy' of Ibn Sina (Nasr 1996b) and the doctrine of the intellect adopted by the Muslim Peripatetics (mashsha'un) in general. Instead, the discussion will concentrate primarily upon the Isma'ili philosophy so closely connected with Hermetic, Pythagorean and Neoplatonic teachings, the school of Illumination (ishraq) of al-Suhrawardi and his followers, certain strands of Islamic philosophy in Spain and later Islamic philosophy in Persia and India. However, it would also have to include the doctrinal formulations of Sufism and its metaphysics from al-Ghazali and Ibn al-'Arabi to the present

Isma'ili and Hermetic philosophy .2

Isma'ili philosophy was among the earliest to be formulated in Islam going back to the Umm al-kitab (The Mother of Books) composed in the second century ah (eighth century ad). It expanded in the fourth century ah (tenth century ad) with Abu Hatim al-Razi and Hamid al-Din Kirmani and culminated with Nasir-i Khusraw (Corbin 1993, 1994). By nature this whole philosophical tradition was esoteric in character and identified philosophy itself with the inner, esoteric and therefore mystical dimension of religion. It was concerned with the hermeneutic interpretation (ta'wil) of sacred scripture and saw authentic philosophy as a wisdom which issues from the instructions of the Imam (who is identified on a certain level with the heart-intellect), the figure who is able to actualize the potentialities of the human intellect and enable it to gain divine knowledge. The cosmology, psychology and eschatology of Isma'ilism are inextricably connected with its Imamology and the role of the Imam in initiation into the divine mysteries. All the different schools of Isma'ili philosophy, therefore, must be considered as mystical philosophy despite notable distinctions between them, especially, following the downfall of the Fatimids, between the interpretations of those who followed the Yemeni school of Isma'ilism and those who accepted Hasan al-Sabbah and 'The Resurrection of Alamut' in the seventh century ah (thirteenth century ad).

Two of the notable philosophical elements associated with Shi'ism in general and Isma'ilism in particular during the early centuries of Islamic history are Hermetism and Pythagoreanism, the presence of which is already evident in that vast corpus of writings associated with Jabir ibn Hayyan, who was at once alchemist and philosopher. The philosophical dimension of the Jabirian corpus is certainly of a mystical nature, having incorporated much of Hermeticism into

itself, as are later works of Islamic alchemy which in fact acted as channels for the transmission of Hermetic philosophy to the medieval West. When one thinks of the central role of Hermeticism in Western mystical philosophy, one must not forget the immediate Islamic origin of such fundamental texts as the Emerald Tablet and the Turba Philosophorum, and therefore the significance of such works as texts of Islamic mystical philosophy. Obviously, therefore, one could not speak of Islamic mystical philosophy without mentioning at least the Hermetical texts integrated into Islamic thought by alchemists as well as philosophers and Sufis, and also Hermetic texts written by Muslim authors themselves. It should be recalled in this context in fact that the philosopher Ibn Sina had knowledge of certain Hermetic texts such as Poimandres and the Sufi Ibn al-'Arabi displays vast knowledge of Hermeticism in his al-Futuhat al-makkiyya (The Meccan Illuminations) and many other works (Sezgin 1971). As for Pythagoreanism, although elements of it are seen in the Jabirian corpus, it was primarily in the Rasa'il (Epistles) of the Ikhwan al-Safa' in the fourth century ah (tenth century ad), who came from a Shi'ite background and whose work was wholly adopted by later Isma'ilism, that one sees the full development of an Islamic Pythagoreanism based upon the symbolic and mystical understanding of numbers and geometric forms (Netton 1982). What is called Pythagorean number mysticism in the West had a full development in the Islamic world, and was in fact more easily integrated into the general Islamic intellectual framework than into that .of Western Christianity

Illuminationist philosophy .3

Perhaps the most enduring and influential school of mystical philosophy in Islam came into being in the sixth century ah (twelfth century ad) with Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi, who founded the school of ishq or Illumination. Al-Suhrawardi's basic premise was that knowledge is available to man not through ratiocination alone but also, and above all, through illumination resulting from the purification of one's inner being. He founded a school of philosophy which some have called theosophy in its original sense, that is, mystical philosophy through and through but without being against logic or the use of reason. In fact, al-Suhrawardi criticized Aristotle and the Muslim Peripatetics on logical grounds before setting about expounding the doctrine of ishq. This doctrine is based not on the refutation of logic, but of transcending its categories through an illuminationist knowledge based on immediacy and presence, or what al-Suhrawardi himself called 'knowledge by presence' (al-'ilm al-huduri), in contrast to conceptual knowledge (al-'ilm al-husuli) which is our ordinary method of knowing based on concepts (Ha'iri Yazdi 1992).

In his masterpiece Hikmat al-ishraq (The Philosophy of Illumination), translated by the foremost Western student of al-Suhrawardi, Henry Corbin, as *Le Livre de la Sagesse Orientale* (The Book of Oriental Wisdom), the Master of Illumination presents an exposition of a form of mystical philosophy which has had a following up to the present day. Based upon the primacy of illumination by the angelic lights as the primary means of attaining authentic knowledge, the school of ishraq in fact was instrumental in bestowing a mystical character upon nearly all later Islamic philosophy, which drew even closer to Islamic esotericism or Sufism than in the earlier centuries of Islamic history without ever ceasing to be philosophy. Although the wedding between philosophy and mysticism in Islam is due most of all to the gnostic and sapiential nature of Islamic spirituality itself, on the formal level it is most of all the school of Illumination or ishraq which was instrumental in actualizing this wedding, as eight centuries of later Islamic philosophy bears witness

Philosophy in the Maghrib and Spain .4

The rise of intellectual activity in the Maghrib and, especially, Andalusia was associated from the beginning with an intellectual form of Sufism in which Ibn Masarra was to play a central role. Most of the later Islamic philosophers of this region possessed a mystical dimension, including even the Peripatetics Ibn Bajja and Ibn Tufayl. The former's *Tadbir al-mutawahhid* (Regimen of the Solitary), far from being a political treatise, deals in reality with man's inner being. Ibn Tufayl's *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* (Living Son of the Awake), interpreted by many in the West in naturalistic and rationalistic terms, is a symbolic account of the wedding between the partial and universal intellect within the human being, a wedding which results consequently in the confirmation of revelation that is also received through the archangel of revelation, who is none other than the objective embodiment of the universal intellect. Moreover, this mystical tendency is to be seen in its fullness in less well-known figures such as Ibn al-Sid of Badajoz who, like the *Ikhwan al-Safa'*, was devoted to mathematical mysticism, and especially the Sufi Ibn Sab'in, the last of the Andalusian philosophers of the seventh century ah (thirteenth century ad), who developed one of the most extreme forms of mystical philosophy in Islam based upon the doctrine of the transcendent unity of being (*wahdat al-wujud*) (Taftazani and Leaman 1996). Andalusia was also the home of the greatest expositor of Sufi metaphysics, Ibn al-'Arabi

Illuminationist thought in the East .5

In eastern lands of the Islamic world and especially Persia, which was the main theatre for the

flourishing of Islamic philosophy from the seventh century ah (thirteenth century ad) onward, primarily mystical philosophy was dominant during later centuries despite the revival of the discursive philosophy of the mashsha'is, such as Ibn Sina, by Khwajah Nasir al-Din al-Tusi and others. It was in the East in the seventh and eighth centuries ah (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries ad) that the doctrines of ishraq with its emphasis on inner vision and illumination were revived by al-Suhrawardi's major commentators, Shams al-Din al-Shahrazuri and Qutb al-Din al-Shirazi, who was also a master of Ibn Sinan philosophy. The next three centuries saw mystical ideas and doctrines become ever more combined with the philosophical theses of the earlier schools, and figures such as Ibn Turkah Isfahani sought consciously to combine the teachings of Ibn Sina, al-Suhrawardi and Ibn al-'Arabi.

This tendency culminated in the tenth century ah (sixteenth century ad) with the establishment of the School of Isfahan by Mir Damad and the foremost metaphysician of later Islamic thought, Mulla Sadra, in whom the blending of ratiocination, inner illumination and revelation became complete (Corbin 1972). In this school the most rigorous logical discourse is combined with illumination and direct experience of ultimate reality, as seen so amply in Mulla Sadra's masterpiece *al-Asfar al-arba'ah* (The Four Journeys). This later Islamic philosophy is certainly mystical philosophy, relying as it does on 'experiential' knowledge and direct vision of ultimate reality and the angelic worlds, a vision that is associated with the eye of the heart ('ayn al-qalb orchism-i dil). However, it is also a philosophy in which the categories of logic are themselves seen as ladders for ascent to the world of numinous reality in accordance with the Islamic perspective, in which what would be called Islamic mysticism from a Christian perspective is of a gnostic ('irfani) and sapiential nature, Islamic mysticism being essentially a path of knowledge of which love is the consort, rather than a way of love exclusive of knowledge.

In any case it was this type of philosophy, associated especially with the name of Mulla Sadra, that has dominated the philosophical scene in Persia during the past few centuries and produced major figures such as Hajji Mulla Hadi al-Sabzawari and Mulla 'Ali Zunuzi in the thirteenth century ah (nineteenth century ad), both of whom were philosophers as well as mystics. It is also this type of philosophy that continues to this day and has in fact been revived during the past few decades. Nearly all philosophers in Persia associated with the school of Mulla Sadra, which is also known as *al-hikmat al-muta'aliya* (literally the 'transcendent theosophy'), have been and remain at once philosophers and mystics.

In India likewise, Islamic philosophy began to spread only after al-Suhrawardi and during the past seven centuries most Islamic philosophers in that land have been also what in the West

would be called mystics. It is not accidental that the school of Mulla Sadra spread rapidly after him in India and has had expositors there to this day. Perhaps the most famous of Muslim intellectual figures in India, Shah Waliullah of Delhi, exemplifies this reality. He was a philosopher and Sufi as well as a theologian, and his many writings attest to the blending of philosophy and mysticism. It can in fact be said that Islamic philosophy in India is essentially mystical philosophy, despite the attention paid by the Islamic philosophers there to logic and in some cases to natural philosophy and medicine.

Sufism and the Akbarian tradition .6

No treatment of mystical philosophy in Islam would be complete without a discussion of doctrinal Sufism and Sufi metaphysics, although technically speaking in Islamic civilization a clear distinction has always been made between philosophy (al-falsafa or al-hikma) and Sufi metaphysics and gnosis (al-ma'rifah, 'irfan). However, as the term 'mystical philosophy' is understood in English, it would certainly include Sufi metaphysical and cosmological doctrines which were not explicitly formulated until the sixth and seventh centuries ah (twelfth and thirteenth centuries ad) although their roots are to be found in the Qur'an and hadith and the sayings and writings of the early Sufis. The first Sufi authors who turned to an explicit formulation of Sufi metaphysical doctrines were Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali in his later esoteric treatise such as *Mishkat al-anwar* (The Niche of Lights) and *al-Risalat al-laduniyya* (Treatise on Divine Knowledge), and 'Ayn al-Qudat Hamadani who followed a generation after him.

The writings of these great masters were, however, a prelude for the vast expositions of the master of Islamic gnosis Muhyi al-Din Ibn al-'Arabi, perhaps the most influential Islamic intellectual figure of the past seven hundred years. Not only did he profoundly influence many currents of Sufism and establish an 'Akbarian tradition' identified with such later masters as Sadr al-Din Qunawi, 'Abd al-Rahman Jami and, in the last century, Amir 'Abd al-Qadir and Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawi. He and his school also influenced formal philosophy to such an extent that a figure such as Mulla Sadra would not be conceivable without him. The Ibn al-'Arabian doctrines of the transcendent unity of being, the universal man, the imaginal world and eschatological realities are not only esoteric and mystical doctrines of the greatest significance in themselves for the understanding of the inner teachings of Islam, but are also sources of philosophical meditation for generations of Islamic philosophers to the present day, who have cultivated diverse and rich schools of mystical philosophy during the past eight centuries and brought into being currents of philosophical thought that are still alive in the Islamic world. One

need only think of such fourteenth century ah (twentieth century ad) figures as 'Alalamah Tabataba'i in Persia and 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud in Egypt to realize the significance of the wedding between philosophy and mysticism in the Islamic intellectual tradition, not only over the ages, but as part of the contemporary Islamic intellectual scene

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