Islamic Mysticism

It possible for us to know God immediately or directly? Our ordinary knowledge of God is knowledge by representation/correspondence (al ‘ilm al husuli). We have a concept of God; we don’t feel the real God. We know God through some concepts. These concepts provide us with abstract knowledge, mental knowledge. This is not immediate feeling of God. The mystic is looking to know God, not through these abstract concepts. In other words, a mystic is looking for knowing God directly or immediately.

1.Mystical Knowledge

The word ‘Erfān is from the root ‘Arafa (ع ر ف) means knowing, but ‘erfan is a specific kind of knowing. Mystical knowledge is different from ordinary knowledge, such as scientific and philosophical knowledge. We cannot obtain mystical knowledge just through sensory perception, thinking or reading books.

There is a kind of direct knowledge or inner knowledge or immediate knowledge that comes through our heart or soul. This is the strongest type of knowledge and it called “knowledge by presence” (‘ilm al-huzuri العلم الحضوری), such as our self-awareness.

God’s knowledge of the world is knowledge by the presence of things, it is not acquired knowledge. God knows everything immediately because everything comes from God.

Is it possible for us to know God immediately or directly? Our ordinary knowledge of God is knowledge by representation/correspondence (al ‘ilm al husuli العلم الحصولی). We have a concept of God; we don’t feel the real God. We know God through some concepts. These concepts provide us with abstract knowledge, mental knowledge. This is not immediate feeling of God. The mystic is looking to know God, not through these abstract concepts. In other words, a mystic is looking for knowing God directly or immediately.

Is this possible? Someone asked Imam Ali: have you ever seen your Lord? Imam said: I do not worship the lord that I have not seen it. What does it mean? It means that direct knowledge of God is possible.

People like the Prophet and Imam Ali don’t see anything unless they see God with them and before seeing anything else they see God. Of course as the Quran excplicitly says, God cannot be seen by eyes. Therefore, Israel’s request was not a logical request because they wanted to see god openly. God punished them because of their irrational request.

One of the ways for knowing God is knowing the self. If you know yourself, you will know your

God. Of course we know our self, but then why don't we know God? This is because our knowledge of our self is not a real knowledge. If we develop our inner eyes, then we see .ourselves and the reality of things and reality of things that are not separate from God

The Nature of Mystical Knowledge.2

There are some terms in western languages that is equivalent for Erfan such as Gnosticism, mysticism, and spirituality. They use "Sufism" for Islamic mysticism. But the Islamic word which has its root is the Islamic sources is the word "Erfan". The important question that arises in this topic is that what kind of knowledge is called Erfan?

There are different types of knowledge: one of them is sensory knowledge, the other one is empirical knowledge which is the outcome of the cooperation between reason and senses, and the third one is a knowledge that we obtain only from reasoning and thinking, this is rational knowledge, for example mathematics or logical conclusions. There is a fourth type of knowledge, the knowledge that we have about religion such as the knowledge about life after death (resurrection). This is the knowledge that we got from revelation so the major source of religious knowledge is revelation and Quranic knowledge. But we have a fifth type of knowledge which is mystical knowledge.

Mystical knowledge is different from first four types of knowledge mentioned above. Mystical knowledge has its roots within us, but it is hidden and we could discover it. We have to prepare our heart in order to have this type of knowledge. It needs purification of heart and cleaning of .soul. Purification has several levels that the highest level is in infallible Imam

Method of Acquiring Mystical Knowledge.3

What is the mystical knowledge and how can we acquire mystical knowledge? Can we acquire mystical knowledge through reading books or listening to others?

In the mysticism we are not always active. Knowledge comes from outside. One of the characteristic of mystical experience that William James mentions in his book The Varieties of Religious Experience is "passivity". Mystics are passive in receiving mystical experiences, as is the case in prophets. A prophet doesn't decide to receive revelation. Of course we are passive but we can play our role in preparing ourselves in order to receive this knowledge. We can prepare ourselves with faith, purifying our heart and contemplation, etc.

Mystical knowledge is from the category of direct knowledge or direct awareness and encountering with a reality. So by reading books we will not encounter with a reality; we just take some concepts and some idea from books. Also when we listen to some one, we are not encountering with a reality.

According to the Quran, God himself is the best witness for his being. In the lower level we see God through his creatures, but in the higher level of mystical knowledge we don't see god through his signs. We see God directly; he is himself sufficient. Then through God we see the world and other creatures.

Thinking is the first step for acquiring mystical knowledge. The second source for acquiring mystical knowledge relates to our action. This is a kind of knowledge that depends on act not is the key for acquiring this knowledge. According to holy (العبوديـة) only reflection. Obedience Quran the ultimate human perfection is Ma'refah or knowledge of God. This knowledge comes through worshiping God. This Quranic teaching tells us that the methodology for real knowledge of god is different from the methodology in acquiring ordinary knowledge. and faith is the knowledge of the truth. (التقـــــوى=The knowledge that depend on piety (Taqvā .This knowledge leads us to salvation and ultimate happiness

Theoretical and Practical Mysticism.4

Human perfection depends on both knowledge and practice. Knowledge without practice is useless and practice without knowledge does not lead to human perfection.

Some philosophers say we have two types of reasons or our reasons have two areas: Theoretical .(العقـل العملـى) and practical reason (العقـل النظـرى) theoretical/reflective reason reason argues about what is in reality and practical reason talks about what we should do in regard with reality, so we need first to know the reality (including God, ourselves and external world), and then we need to react and to practice.

and (العرفـان النظـرى) Therefore Mysticism also divides in two branches: theoretical Mysticism It means we may know the reality from Mystic's point of .(العرفـان العملـى) practical Mysticism view and we may live according to mystical teaching.

In Mysticism, in fact, it's impossible to separate knowledge and practice. It is also noteworthy that all religious beliefs have practical impact in our life. Practice is not limited to physical practice. Practice in this context includes what we do with our body as well as our heart, for example one of the most important religious practices is remembrance of God.

In fact, the inner aspect of human being is more important than the external aspect of the action. According to Islamic teachings the value of an action depends on the purity of intention .and the degree of faith, not only on the external size of the action

Knowledge and Purification .5

In the second verse of the surah Juma'h (chapter 62), God says:

"He it is who raised among the inhabitants of Mecca a messenger from among themselves,

who recites to them his communications and purifies them, and teaches them the book and the wisdom, although they were before certainly in clear error." (Trans. by Shakir)

This verse explains the mission of the Prophet. According to this verse, the holy Prophet came for the perfection of human being. How can human being develop his personality and how can become perfect in his spiritual dimension?

In general, we can say perfection depends on two elements: knowledge and practice, So the obstacle for perfection naturally is the opposite of this: ignorance and immorality

In order to become perfect we need to know what perfection is, what is good and what is bad, and to be able to follow what we know. So the Prophet came to give us the book (i.e. the Quran) and to train us. This is the mission of all prophets. Then prophets bring a complete system of education not only the theoretical aspect of education.

In order to gain knowledge of the truth or to know the book we need to use our reasons. Revelation alone without reason is not enough because if we don't have reason we can't understand revelation. Beside reflection on the revelation we also must think about other realities such as ourselves. We have a reach source of knowledge within our self. So we need all sources and all of them are necessary for our perfection. Thus, religious education and human independent understanding are necessary in human perfection.

The Subject of Mystical Knowledge.6

Mystical knowledge is the direct knowledge of the reality, i.e., the immediate awareness of the truth in the same way that we are aware of ourselves. Mystics claim that we can have direct knowledge of God. In certain Islamic sources "seeing God" is mentioned. In his prayer on the Day of Arafeh Imam Hussein says, "The eyes that do not see you are blind". This is spiritual blindness.

The subject of mystical knowledge is God. Knowing God is important for the mystic (ʿārif) because it is the purpose of creation. The Quran says: "and I have not created the jinn and the men except that they should serve me". Worship is interpreted as knowing God. There is a divine tradition (hadith qudsi) in which God says: I was a hidden treasure, I like to be known then I created the creatures in order to be known. So this knowledge (knowledge of God) is the ultimate goal of creation and the ultimate stage of human perfection.

Knowing God includes knowledge of other things, because all things belong to and depend on God in this view. God has essence, attributes, names and acts. His acts include whatever exists in the world. God's acts are manifestation of His names; and His names are derived from His attributes; and His attributes come out of His essence. So God's essence is the root and source of all realities. Of course we believe that God's essence is unknown or hidden.

Respect, love, and remembrance that are states of heart, can be expressed in different forms. Remembrance of God (Dhikr of Allah) means to be aware of God and to remember Him. When one remembers God he either does it in his heart or declares it verbally too. In both case he is in the state of Dhikr. This way there exist two types of Dhikr: in heart and in tongue. Human being is either self-centered or God-centered: self-centeredness is negligence of God. A mystic or an ʻārif tries to train himself in a way that he can see God and view His manifestation in everything and everywhere, and escape from negligence.