# The Essence and Shell of Religion from the Viewpoint of Islamic Mysticism

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## Abstract

"The Essence and Shell of Religion" is a philosophical and theological problem that is Occidental in context, dating back to the Renaissance. "Religious Experience" and "Sophia Perennis" are two mooted theories on this issue. The essence of religion, according to the first theory, lies in the experience that renders its possessor a religious person and the shell is a set of beliefs that has its origin in the independence that the wayfarer feels after touching the essence. The second theory defines religion as a two-layered phenomenon whose inward layer is monotheism as manifested in the form of Sophia Perennis inside the human being and the shell consists of the traditions that lead the wayfarer toward the gem. In Islamic mysticism, religion is an integrated seamless truth that has triple manifestations: exoteric, esoteric, and ultra-esoteric. The esoteric manifestation is the *individual unity* that is also the gem of religion. Even though they are seen as the shell, exoteric manifestations are merely diluted shadows of the same esoteric truth and thus they are imperishable. Religiosity is also a threefold entity whose essence is the absolutely certain intuition of mystical monotheism. Thus conceived, religion and religiosity are coextensive in their essence.

**Keywords:** Sharia (religion), tariqa (spiritual discipline), truth, vicegerency, individual unity.

## Statement of the Problem

The essence of religion is a degree of religion that is deemed the building block and truth of religion, the ultimate telos of the legislation of divine laws and codification of the spiritual discipline that distinguishes true believers from the hypocrites and disbelievers.

This article is concerned with the essence of religion and religiosity from the perspective of Islamic mysticism and its relation with Gnostic ontology. It addresses essence of religion and religiosity by analyzing the ideas of Islamic mystics. There are some relevant issues in this regard as follows: Is there a root-branch relation between the constituents of religion and religiosity from the Islamic mystical point of view? If so, what is the root and what is the branch? How has this root-branch relation been expounded in Islamic mysticism?

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## Background

There are various theories in terms of the origin of the debate on the essence of religion: some have ascribed it to Hegel, see (Malekian 1350 Sh, 12) and some others see it as a contribution of Schleiermacher (Proudfoot 1377 Sh, 12). Others maintain that it was put forward by Locke and Hume (Hosseinzadeh 1376 Sh, 157). The heyday of this debate goes back to the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries. Nascent forms of this debate could be traced back to the empiricism of Western philosophy in the Renaissance. Ever since, in modern debates of the essence of religion, two main theories catch the eye: religious empiricism and traditionalism.

## Religious Empiricism and the Essence of Religion and Religiosity

Religious empiricism introduces religious experience as the essence of religion (Qaeminia 1381 Sh, 115-34). This approach, which was initiated by Schleiermacher and pursued in different schools of thought (see Proudfoot 1377 Sh, 108; Sadeghi 1379 Sh, 224-26), seeks two main goals (see Hordon 1368 Sh, 40; Qaeminia 1381 Sh, 119): (a) description of the essence of religion and its central core, (b) defense of religion by reducing its essence to religious experience and precisely depicting its various scopes (such as beliefs, rituals, and their effects in a pious life) and describing their place in religion and their interrelations, safeguarding them against the attacks of scientism. Religious experience, according to Schleiermacher, essentially hinges upon the absolute sense of dependence and infinite intuition independently of any perception: "Religiosity is neither a science nor an action; but it is sensational purification and immediate self-consciousness" (Proudfoot 1377 Sh, 34-37). He believes that not only the human individual does not need any proofs and evidence in his personal moment of religious sensation, but also he expresses this experience in light of religious beliefs and deeds. These are not the foundation on which this sensation rests, as the latter is essentially different from the beliefs. The foundation of religion is thus neither thought nor action, but intuition and sensation.

Like Schleiermacher, William James believes that religion is sensational in its essence (James 1377 Sh, 28-29). He is of the opinion that the headspring of religious life consists in the very human sensations (Qaeminia 1381 Sh, 116). Rudolph Otto describes religious experience as a numinous experience (Peterson 1376 Sh, 41-42; Shirvani 1381 Sh, 44-45) and hence the essence of religion should be sought in such an experience (Qaeminia 1381 Sh, 141). Stace believes that mystical experiences constitute the essence of religion since the only common ingredient of various forms of religions is mystical experience. He describes it as a pure experience that does not admit of any interpretation. He reduces the external differences of these experiences to their interpretations, suggesting that a unique essence could be identified among these differences

(Stace 1367 Sh, 23). According to Paul Tillich, what makes the authentic religion is the ultimate attachment, rather particular religious beliefs and rituals (Hordon 1368 Sh, 147-48).

Some Iranian religious intellectuals like Muhammad Mojtahed Shabestari and Abdulkarim Soroush also believe, *a la* Tillich, that the essence of religion and religiosity lies in religious experience, characterizing this experience in terms of human sensations (Mojtahed Shabestari 1376 Sh, 57-136; Yusefi Eshkevari 1377 Sh, 168-69).

## Traditionalism and the Essence of Religion and Religiosity

Traditionalism is a twentieth-century school of thought that has its origin in the anti-modernist sentiments and Orientalist attitudes of the nineteenth century (see Abdullahi 1386 Sh, 14-16).[2] Tradition as understood by this school does not necessarily refer to certain practices or habits (Nasr 1380 Sh, 34). To the contrary, it implies a set of universal truths and principles that are originated in a divine headstream (Khondoghabadi 1380 Sh, 12), transmitted to believers, and then operationalized by holy prophets. Thus conceived, tradition is the total sum of these truths and their communalization among the believers (Nasr 1380 Sh, 135). According to traditionalism, religion has two ontological domains, i.e., earthly and ideal (Nasr 1379 Sh, 108-9). The relationship of earthly and ideal religions is an exoteric/esoteric relationship in the sense that the ideal religion shares the same truth with the earthly religion indeed. Sophia Perennis is then a key concept in traditionalism (Khondoghabadi 1380 Sh, 65). Sophia Perennis is a sort of knowledge that has always been and will continue to be there. It is a religious truth that is absolute, divine, and thus perennial, lying at the heart of all religions such that each religion is deemed a particular manifestation of it (Nasr 1380 Sh, 136; Nasr 1379 Sh, 103-4). Sophia Perennis is essentially manifested in metaphysics or the first philosophy as the knowledge of the reality of realities or the very transcendent principle of monotheism at the heart of Islamic theology (Nasr 1379 Sh, 103-4).[3] As mentioned earlier, religion as understood by this school, has two domains: exoteric and esoteric (Nasr 1382 Sh, 10), and the essence of religion lies in the esoteric domain. This essence is an absolute reality (truth); i.e., the transcendent essence of divinity (Nasr 1379 Sh, 115; Nasr 1382 Sh, 236; Nasr 1381 Sh, 97-98), which has been referred to in various forms and manifested in the Islamic doctrine of monotheism (Nasr 1379 Sh, 114). This

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2. This school, which was inaugurated by the French thinker Rene Geneon (1886-1951), has such prominent advocates as Kumara Soami (in the twentieth century), Fritut Shuan (1907-1998), Martin Lings (1909-), Burckhardt (1908-1984), and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1312-). These intellectuals are largely under the influence of Islam and Islamic mysticism. Some of them, like Geneon, Shuan, and Lings, have already converted to Islam, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr is a renowned Muslim thinker.

3. Such knowledge, according to traditionalists, is only attainable by intuitive reason or intellectual intuition through which reason could be in direct contact with the realities, without the aid of the concepts and thus epistemological duality of the subject and the object vanishes.

reality makes the content of Sophia Perennis through an intellectual intuition. In this way, Sophia Perennis (as intuitive knowledge) belongs to the esoteric domain of religion, and is concerned with the transcendent essence of divinity (Nasr 1379 Sh, 14) as the very essence of authentic religiosity (Malekian 1379 Sh, 38). In this light, the essence of religion from the perspective of traditionalism is the very transcendent essence of divinity that is intuited in the believer's heart as perennial reason, which constitutes the essence of religiosity as well. Traditionalists believe that all religions share the same essence upon their esoteric domain (Nasr 1380 Sh, 480), divine reality (Malekian 1379 Sh, 38; Nasr 1393 Sh, 236; and Nasr 1381 Sh, 97-98), and Sophia Perennis (Nasr 1379 Sh, 114-15). The seeming differences between religions have their origin in the fact that they are different manifestations of the same essence, although these diverse manifestations are rooted in different cultures, traditions, languages, and races (Nasr 1379 Sh, 114-15). Accordingly, this unique essence would be touched by people of different cultures only through their own indigenous religion. As they are all true in terms of their esoteric essence, religions are also exoterically true (with regard to their creeds and rituals) in their primordial milieu until the emergence of a new religion in the same context, which rightly plays their meditative role, as noted before (Shuan 1383 Sh, 30-31; Nasr 1379 Sh, 118; Nasr 1380 Sh, 481; Nasr 1381 Sh, 15). Accordingly, religious exclusivism of some religions is interpreted as something that belongs to the exoteric domain of a religion to protect its articles of faith and rituals. Traditionalists demonstrate this latter claim through Islamic mysticism (see Shuan 1381 Sh, 130-32; Nasr 1393 Sh, 230).[4]

## Islamic Mysticism and the Essence of Religion and Religiosity

Islamic mysticism provides man with a system of esoteric prescriptions and exoteric etiquettes through which he could spiritually become a mirror of truth. However, the issue that should be addressed here is the offspring of these prescriptions and etiquettes. Needless to say, such a hazardous path needs a mentor to teach the formalities of the voyage to wayfarers. Thus, the presence of a divine legislator and a spiritual instructor is definitely necessary for the wayfarers who are pacing toward the ultimate telos of being as it would be rationally senseless to touch the truth without a path mentor, according to Islamic mysticism. Genesis and systematization (codification) are declared as mutually interrelated factors in Islamic mysticism. Muhyi l-Din ibn al-ʿArabi describes this as the reason behind the legislation of divine laws, maintaining that religion is a spiritual rector that contrives the man here and hereafter may he achieves the Lord's pleasure and reaches happiness:

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4. It is worthy to note that Islamic mysticism does not ratify the legitimacy of religions in the same time as the traditionalists claim, but the source their claims on this matter is the alleged substantial unity of religions.

> It is better for you—may the Lord protect you—to know that the wayfaring is the quality of the wayfarer and the path is where the wayfarer paces on by his prays, spiritual majesties, and intuitive states …. And as the man is the total sum of the universe and a spark of Divine Presence that is manifested in the Divine Names, Attributes and Actions, he needs a mentor to help him through this dangerous path…. This spiritual rector is the legislator and the path is the same revealed religion and everyone who paces on this path shall touch the truth. (Ibn al-ʿArabi 1378 AH, 382).

Thus, it could be said that mysticism see religion as a spiritual rector that is aware of the ups and downs of the world of being and also knows human capabilities and shortcomings. It views man as a representation of divinity, and tries to lead him toward actualization of divine goals, provided that the wayfarer follows its prescriptions and divine etiquettes.

### The Essence of Religion from the Perspective of Islamic Mysticism
### The Triple Domains of Religion in Islamic Mysticism

It is now clear that mystical religion leads the wayfarer forward step by step in conformity to the telos of divine legislation, which assists man to actualize the eternal end of creation. Moreover, as human existence is essentially elastic and ever-moving, religion should manifest itself in various forms for different human existential stages. Thus, if man is in the stage of differentiation and diversity, religion manifests itself in a differentiating and diversified form, and if the wayfarer is in the state of condensation, religion manifests itself in a more colorful form. The Holy Quran also speaks of two stages of prescriptions (condensation) and differentiation in religion: "This is a book, whose verses are made decisive, then are they made plain, from the wise, all-aware" (Q 11:1). This means that divine legislation and being are totally harmonious with each other.

In mystical terminology, the manifestation of religion that belongs to the commonality and represents the ontological stage of diversity is *Sharia* (Divine Law); the elites' manifestation is called *Tariqa* (Divine Path); and the elite of elites' religion is *Haqiqa* (Truth) (Amuli 1368 Sh, 350; Ibn Turka 1378 Sh, 402). These three are different manifestations of a unique truth (Amuli 1362 Sh, 5-6).

Sharia consists in the jurisprudential prescriptions and divine laws that are based on a concatenation of truths and discretions (Motahari 1368 Sh, 5-6). It is a sort of knowledge upon which believers' deeds are legitimized (Mustamali Bukhari 1413 AH, 1121) and fortified (Mustmali Bukhari 1413 AH, 1119). Muhyi l-Din defines Sharia as follows: "Sharia is imposition of some particular actions and forbiddance of some particular actions" (Ibn al-ʿArabi 1370 Sh, 95).

In some verses of Sharia, he describes it as a passage to higher stages and indeed the same tradition that has been preached by holy messengers (Ibn al-ʿArabi 1378 AH, 562).

Tariqa is the operationalization of the prescriptions of Sharia (Amuli 1362 Sh, 344). Mystics are of the belief that the discretions and prescriptions that form the basis of the legislation of the Divine Law are like stations that lead the believer to the Divine Threshold (Amuli 1362 Sh, 345), since divine laws of Sharia are different offshoots of the divine word that lead the wayfarer to the truth.

Truth, as the third stage of religion, is the fruit of the two earlier stages. It consists of deep mystical and Quranic monotheism that is manifested in esoteric knowledge of the noumenal truth of being. That is, having appreciated the divine laws of Sharia and having acted upon the practices of *Tariqa*, the wayfarer ascends to the stage of truth where his heart's eye is lightened by the light of perennial knowledge. What the mystic finds in this stage is that there is an infinitely absolute and luminous being beyond all manifestations and ontological diversities to which all differences and ontological diversities are reduced as manifestations of an Omnipotent Oneness. This stage of Sharia is an expression of the true oneness according to which the Lord is the only essential truth, other entities being its manifestations. He is the Omnipresent and existentially independent as Amuli defines the truth as "*Haqiqa* [Truth] is the understanding of the oneness of existence and reducing the existing differences, contrasts, and distinctions into that oneness" (Amuli 1362 Sh, 345). Muhyi l-Din says:

> Truth is the manifestation of the True [as a Divine Name] beyond the veils of servitude. And as the veils of ignorance are torn, it becomes clear for you that the attribute of servitude is one and the same with the attribute of the True. For them, and for us, the attribute of servitude is one and the same with the True itself, not the True as an attribute. Then, the exoteric is creatures and the esoteric is the True, and the former has its origin in the latter. (Ibn al-ʿArabi 1378 AH, 4:385).

Mystics construe this monotheism as "existential monotheism," suggesting that as the negation of diversified divinities is among the articles of faith in Sharia, the negation of the possibility of various existents-by-themselves has been prescribed in higher levels of religion. Moreover, just as divine monotheism (the negation of diversified divinities) results in the decline of manifest polytheism, existential monotheism leads to the disappearance of hidden polytheism (Amuli 1368a Sh, 74-75). In this way, as polytheism is of two kinds, monotheism also has various levels, the highest of which is the negation of existential diversity and insistence on the oneness of existence. Sayyid Haydar Amuli describes the truth as seeing the diversity in unity and the unity in diversity, or in other terms, seeing the differentiation in gatheredness or the demonstration of the same and the negation of otherness or seeing the evil in the goodness or distinguishing the Creator from the creatures and the dissolution of the latter in the former. He believes that these definitions are all

hinged upon the negation of otherness both objectively and subjectively and demonstration of the existence of God both objectively and subjectively (Amuli 1368a Sh, 74-75).

Muhyi l-Din describes the truth in poetic terms as follows:

> Verily the truth is eternally one/ but reason defies oneness in thought/ then there is no second essence to be added to it/ rather diversity has its origin in creation/ and creation is nothing but one thing in its essence/ wherein there is no family, father, and children. (Ibn al-ʿArabi 1378 AH, 2:563)

The main question is how these three manifestations of religion are related to one another. Are they three separable parts of religion that have no interrelations? How would they be interrelated? And does this relationship prove the sublimity of one of them over the others? If it is so, which one is the sublime?

Having taken the above-mentioned correspondence codification and evolution into account, it should be said that as the evolution has an absolute truth and different manifestations, codification also includes a unified truth and various manifestations and as the unique evolutionary truth was existence in the absolute sense, in Divine Law [*Sharʿ*] this unique being is called God (Absolute Truth) as a truth that appears in the three manifestations of *Haqiqa*, Sharia, and *Tariqa*. Thus conceived, in both cases, the difference is reduced to manifestation; that is to say, wherever the presence of the Divine Codifier is stronger, the esoteric manifestation of religion becomes apparent, and wherever this presence is weaker, the exoteric emergence of religion becomes ostensible. This absolute truth would never become manifested in Sharia, as the codification of Divine Norms could never represent the Divine Codifier's intelligence in its perfect form. In the same spirit, Jandi regards religion as a unique equivocal phenomenon that has three manifestations:

> They all [whether *Haqiqa* or *Tariqa* or Sharia] are different existential determinations (stages) and bounteous manifestations that have been sprung into existence with regard to the subjects of emanation if not it is essentially a unique reality that is *the purely absolute existence* not anything else. Then, monotheism is the basic reality, and the diversity merely belongs to manifestations. (Jandi 1423 AH, 267)

Mystics are of the opinion that Sharia is principally one and the same with *Tariqa*, and the latter is in turn contextually identical with *Haqiqa*, because they all have their origin in the Absolute Truth or the Divine Legislator as its manifestations: "Then Sharia and *Haqiqa* are both principally and contextually identical, as Sharia is *haqq* and implies a *Haqiqa*. The truth of Sharia lies in what is descended in an intuition…. And it is both exoterically and esoterically identical" (Ibn al-ʿArabi 1378 AH, 2:563).

Muhyi l-Din explains this identity by saying that *Haqiqa* and Sharia represent the same contents: "We understand that *Haqiqa* beseeches the truth and it is not in contradiction with it, there is no truth that contrasts Sharia, then Sharia is one and the same with *Haqiqa*" (Ibn al-ʿArabi 1378 AH, 2:563).

In this light, these three are principally and contextually identical to the truth they share with each other: "Sharia, *Haqiqa*, and *Tariqa* are identical in their truth" (Amuli 1362 Sh, 312). Elsewhere, he calls this unique truth *the sacred*.

Then, it becomes evident that these three domains are one and the same and their differences are understood in terms of equivocality in manifestation. As I pointed out before, the correspondence of codification and evolution shows us how to interpret the differences of the triple stages of religion. As due to the intensity of manifestation in being divine manifestations become multiplied and they are equivocally interrelated, it is the intensity of manifestation that brings about the difference in Sharia. Wherever condensation is powerful, the esoteric layers of religion emerge, and where the diversity comes to the throne, it leads to the disclosure of exoteric layers of religion. According to Muhyi l-Din, all people, whether exotericists or esotericists, act upon the Sharia, but the truth (*Haqiqa*) is only revealed for esotericists and it is just in this sense that Sharia and *Haqiqa* are interrelated (Ibn al-ʿArabi 1378 AH, 2:563). Mustamli Bukhari elaborates on this issue as follows:

> Since the secret (*Haqiqa*) resides in the heart of the true believer, only those chosen as men of secret adamantly abide by the rules of Sharia. As Sharia belongs to exotericists and the secret is for esotericists, Sharia is a communal phenomenon and *Haqiqa* is individual indeed. (Mustamli Bukhari 1413 AH, 1143)

The author of *al-Lumuʿa* also believes that religion is essentially twofold; that is, it has an exoteric manifestation along with an esoteric manifestation, the former being manifested in beliefs, deeds, rites, and rituals, and the latter being manifested in such cordial qualities as certainty, nearness, and eagerness (Siraj al-Tusi 1914, 23).

It is indeed worth noting that it is the differentiated religion [Sharia] that represents the path that will finally lead believers to *Haqiqa*. Thus conceived, *Tariqa* is the spirit of Sharia through which wayfarers are led to the final stage of *Haqiqa* (Ibn al-Fanari 1374 Sh, 704).

## *Haqiqa*: the Essence of Religion in Islamic Mysticism

On this conception of religion, its exoteric manifestations are finally reduced to its esoteric manifestations and ontological monotheism is considered the essence of religion, which contains all inferior instances along with the perfections they lack because Sharia is the initial stage and *Tariqa* is the mediatory stage and Haqiqa is the final stage of religion. Moreover, perfection

of the first stage is contingent upon the second and that of the latter hinges upon the final stage. These points imply that the most perfect stage of religion where its essence lies is the final esoteric stage, i.e. Haqiqa (Amuli 1362 Sh, 31).

Thus, *Haqiqa* is the kernel of the kernel, *Tariqa* is the kernel, and Sharia is the crust (Amuli 1368a Sh, 48). From the above remarks, it also becomes clear that advocates of Sharia are exotericists, proponents of *Tariqa* are esotericists, and exponents of *Haqiqa* are the elect of the elects.

Ontological meditations could also lead us to the same point of view because as the first and second determinations are ontologically more powerful, the stage of *Haqiqa* is similarly more condensed and powerful than the inferior stages. Moreover, as in the ontological perspective, the stage of non-manifestedness is seen as the basis of the inferior instances in theology, esoteric domain is the building block of other domains and is the essence of religion.

"*Haqiqa*" as mystical monotheism symbolizes the individual unity because it parallelizes the authentic monism in that it negates ontological diversity. On the other hand, this stage is that of essential mystical monotheism. Mystical existential monism (*Twhid*) is divided into the unity of divine essence, attributes, and acts. According to the latter, all acts are finally reduced to divine acts, and in unity of attributes, all essences and attributes are reduced to the divine essence and attributes (Amuli 1368a Sh, 151-53). These three unities are vertically interrelated and the unity of the divine essence is the pinnacle of the three unities:

> Faded are all essences, attributes, and actions in the eyes of a man who is eternally immersed in divine attributes and actions…. He sees his essence, attributes, and actions lightened by divine essence, attributes, and actions, since he has wholly been submerged in monotheism. Verily, there is no higher spiritual stage than this stage for the wayfarer. (Amuli 1368a Sh, 153).

Thus, *Haqiqa* in its condensational sense implies the reduction of diversity of attributes, acts, and essences into attributive, active, and essential unity, the highest of which is essential monism or the *true literal unity* (*al-wahdat al-haqqat al-haqiqiyya*).

"*Haqiqa*," the stage of condensation: although ontological monism (negation of ontological diversity) is deemed the core of theological monism (negation of theological diversity), its crust is neither jettisonable nor eradicable. They believe that exoteric monotheism should be retained along with esoteric monotheism, always speaking of the middle course and sobriety (Amuli 1368 Sh, 88-89). In their view, true monotheism is an exhaustive monotheism:

> True religion, immovable Islam, and all-comprehensive essential monism implicate keeping oneself away from polytheism both exoterically and esoterically and the denial of ontological otherness both objectively and

subjectively. That is, as mystics view the universe through the prism of oneness, the observer and the observed, the knower and the known, appear the same to them. (Amuli 1368a Sh, 31).

Muhyi l-Din brings together these two kinds of monotheism (theological and ontological) and diversity and unity, or to put the matter more precisely, Sharia (which represents the domain of diversity, differentiation, and the kingdom of solid forms) and *Haqiqa* (which represents pure unity), in the *unity of multiplicity*. To people of this spiritual quality he refers as "existential integrationists," saying that the Lord has decided an absolute solitude for them (*Amuli* 1368b Sh, 1:391).

Thus conceived, these triple manifestations should be understood in an integral fashion. Theological and ontological brands of monotheism are both founded upon the same principle. This sheds light on the relationship between the shell and the essence of mystical religion. In his book, Sayyid Haydar al-Amuli elaborates on these three stages. Muhyi l-Din explains this by saying that the exoteric always exists in the esoteric and the latter is indeed beyond the former: "There is no prescription in Sharia, be it obligatory or recommended, that does not already exist in the Unseen Realm" (Ibn al-ʿArabi 1378 AH, 1:338).

Then, the hierarchical configuration of the triple stages of Sharia, *Tariqa*, and *Haqiqa* does not make them irrelevant to each other. To the contrary, they are steps of the same ladder through which the believer reaches the heaven (Amuli 1362 Sh, 32). Thus, it should be announced very clearly that "The man who does not sanctify his outside, the Devil will spoil his inside with the mirage of truth" (Mustamli Bukhari 1413, 1143). Moreover, "Sharia is like a stone and *Haqiqa* is like gold…. Then Sharia and Haqiqa have that relationship…. This is to say that the purity of the inside hinges upon the sanctity of the outside" (Mustamli Bukhari 1413 AH, 1120).

Motahari depicts this hierarchical relationship in the logical interrelations of *ʿArif* (the mystic) [*Haqiqa*], *Zahid* (Ascetic) [*Tariqa*], and *ʿAbid* (worshipper) [Sharia]. Thus, no *Haqiqa* is conceivable without Sharia and *Tariqa* (Motahari 1368 Sh, 154).

## The Essence of Religiosity from the Perspective of Islamic Mysticism
### Triple Domains of Religiosity in Islamic Mysticism

From the perspective of Islamic mysticism, religiosity is closely intertwined with the mystical view of man's role in religion. Mystics divide human religiosity into three stages according to his generic aptitude, not in terms of his individual dispositions. If man—i.e. the human genus—communicates the divine word to inhabitants of material world, he is in the stage of "messengerhood"; and if he receives the sacred knowledge from the heaven and

is in contact with the realm of intelligence, he is in the stage of "prophethood"; and if he is in direct contact with the Lord and the realm of divine knowledge, he is then in the stage of "*Wilaya*" (Vicegerency of God).

Of course, as I have noted earlier, these statures are conceivable only for the human genus, not for human individuals. They have all been actualized in the case of Prophets and Imams (a), and the terms "prophet" (*nabi*), "messenger" (*rasul*), "vicegerent" (*wali*), and "divine mission" (*bi'tha*) are used to explain their stature.

Messengerhood: messengerhood indicates the difference of missions of messengers with regard to their target audiences, since the messenger brings the nation what they need (Motahari 1368 Sh, 820). Sometimes, *bi'tha* (divine mission) is associated with legislation (*tashri'*), and sometimes, it is not so. For this reason, messengers are divided into the possessors of the determination (Arch-prophets) and non-possessors of the determination (Ibn al-ʿArabi 1378 AH, 1:250).

Having taken this definition of messenger into account, it becomes clear that even though the mission of messengers is designative, which requires their immaculateness, what counts as the point of similitude between immaculate messengers and normal people, i.e, what turns this divine stature into a stage of religiosity for the human genus, is the spirit of this stature that is the cordial relation with *God's people* (*Khalq Allah*), since messengerhood represents the exoteric side of religion all believers are potentially capable to ascend to this stage of religiosity.

Prophethood: a prophet receives divine knowledge from the Lord through angels and transmits it to his people in proportion to their receptivity (Ibn Turka 1378 Sh, 1:166). This kind of relationship with God's people requires divine legislations through which the prophet communicates perennial truths to his people (Amuli 1367 Sh, 168). Prophethood essentially hinges upon the prophet's relationship with the unseen realm of reason through angels. The prophet travels through the unseen realm and speaks with the Lord via angels. Thus, normal non-immaculate people could transcend the terrestrial monde and flap in angelic realm, thus becoming spiritual prophets.

Wilaya: in mysticism, the epistemic existence of an entity precedes its objective existence. The former is said to be a manifestation of divine knowledge. When the entity was within the realm of divine knowledge, it had divine determinations, and after leaving that realm, it becomes humanized both qualitatively and attributively (Ibn Turka 1424 AH, 231; Ibn Turka 1378 Sh, 1:566-842). Now it is up to true believers to re-divinize their deeds and beliefs. In doing so, all dichotomies will disappear and all veils between the beloved and the lover will be torn apart. Once again, they shall come together. Re-divinization of human qualities and attributes is called *wilaya*:

> *Wilaya* is the absorption of believer in the divine essence. Thus conceived, *wali* is one who has been thoroughly absorbed in the Lord. Absorption in this context does not signify total annihilation, but it implies divinization of the human qualities of believers, since there is a face for every believer in divine knowledge as has been mentioned in the following Qur'anic verse: everyone has a face depicted by divine brush. (Ibn Turka 1378 Sh, 1:166)

> This absorption here refers to the redevinization of human qualities and attributes which leads to his eternalization. (Ibn Turka 1378 Sh, 1:169)

The epistemic unification of the known and the knower and divinization of human qualities is the spirit of *wilaya*. Thus, *wali* sees the world through a perennial prism and becomes aware of all secrets of creation.

After divinizing his qualities and attributes and being absorbed in the divine essence, the mystic finds that the only eternal being in the world is the Lord and all diversities will eventually perish and become just manifestations of the divine essence Ibn Turka 1378 Sh, 1:158).

Then, absorption in the divine essence is the intuitive perception of the absolute unity of the Lord and seeing the diversities perished in the view of the eternal light:

> When the wayfarer paces on the path of mystics who have touched the reality through spiritual purification and abstraction and sees the realities through the monistic prism of his eternal face and turns his face to this eternal light his qualities and attributes becomes redivinized and he becomes absorbed in divine essence. (Ibn Turka 1424 AH, 435)

To this end, the mystic should travel through different existential stages, and after re-divinization of his qualities in his third voyage, he returns to the terrestrial monde. Finally, in the fourth voyage, he shall invite his fellow men to keep his footprints until they ascend to the realm of perfection Ibn Turka 1424 AH, 169-70).

Thus, *wilaya* begins from the second voyage when divine attributes are in their infinite and absolute state, like the divine essence itself, and the wayfarers are absolutely open to divine attributes, being distinguished with regard to the scope of their divine attributes, which determine the quality of their absorption and eternality. Needless to say, this stage of religiosity belongs to the human genus to which non-immaculate average people could ascend by the aid of the perfect man: "This knowledge exclusively belongs to the Last Prophet. None of the previous prophets have the merit to receive it but the Last Prophet" (Ibn al-ʿArabi 1370 Sh, 262).

## The Relationship between Stages of Religiosity: Identity in Context, Distinction in Manifestation

According to mystical doctrines, the prophet could not rationally lead the world only with his knowledge of the realm of reason. In fact, it was his immediate knowledge of eternal truths that helped him to administer the affairs of his people. This is because Islamic mysticism sees man as superior to angels. The reality of the perfect man comes to light in that he reaches the degrees from which angels are forbidden. The vicegerent of God cannot, therefore, be content with the angelic revealed truths (Ibn Turka 1378 Sh, 1:154).

In Islamic mysticism, there is a mediatory stage between the realm of reason (angelic realm) and the divine essence, which is called the realm of Allah where angels are not allowed to enter due to their existential limitations, while man has the capacity to do so. To state the matter otherwise, the prophet owes his eternity to divine knowledge (the realm of Allah). Thus, the prophet is *wali* before being sent to his people:

> Prophets are the *walis* who have been absorbed in the divine essence and eternalized by the Lord's will and transmit the truths of the unseen to their people and thus this position (prophethood) is a divine bounty that is only given to chosen people and is not a humanly acquired quality. (Ibn Turka 1378 Sh, 1:169)

In his elaboration of the difference between prophets and vicegerents (*walis*), Ibn al-ʿArabi argues that prophets are the *walis* who have been chosen by the Lord for divine service. Their nearness to the Lord is a direct effect of their own essential aptitude and praying due to the stature of w*ilaya*. Although the stature and kudos of prophets is higher and more magnificent than *walis*, this superiority is still based on the strongest *wilaya* of prophets. Accordingly, thus these two statures have their origin in the same origin and their difference is equivocal (Ibn al-ʿArabi 1378 AH, 2:53).

Thus, it becomes clear that *risala* (messengerhood), *nubuwwa* (prophethood), and *wilaya* (vicegerency) are intertwined in an equivocal fashion as they reveal different sides of the same reality (Amuli 1368a Sh, 385). That is, *wilaya* is the strongest and most esoteric aspect of religiosity as *nubuwwa* is its esoteric aspect and so *risala* is the exoteric aspect (see Ibn Turka 1378 Sh, 1:163):

> Indeed, *wilaya* is the esoteric side of *nubuwwa* in the same sense that the latter is the exoteric side of *risala*. And *nubuwwa* is to guide people through divine legislations. These three statures are different ontological manifestations of the same truth. And this is the reason why it is said that *wilaya* only belongs to the Lord and the Holy Prophet's household. (Amuli 1367 Sh, 403-4)

*Wilaya* is indeed the heart of *nubuwwa* and the true stature of the perfect man. Since the latter and *risala* both belong to the terrestrial monde, they will disappear once the material world perishes, whereas *wilaya* is a stature that is primordially eternal. Then, *wilaya* is the true stature of the perfect man (Amuli 1368a Sh, 99-100): "And verily you have known that the exoteric owes its total being to the esoteric" (Ibn Turka 1378 Sh, 1:166-67).

According to these realities, mystics reiterate that *wilaya* is superior to *nubuwwa* and the latter is also superior to *risala* as they are different manifestations of religiosity: "*Wilaya* is superior to *nubuwwa* and the latter is superior to *risala* as they are hierarchically formatted in an exoteric/esoteric fashion" (Amuli 1368a Sh, 385).

## *Wilaya* as the Essence of Religiosity in Islamic Mysticism

It is now clear that *wilaya* is a universal stature that is attainable for all human individuals, which is why it counts as the essence of religiosity. Although it is strenuous to achieve *wilaya*, there are strong-willed wayfarers who can accomplish it.

*Wilaya*: eternity after absorption. *Wilaya* is the stature of the servant's absorption in the divine essence, which is called the stature of integration the possessor of which is called the True Monotheist: "If the mystic brings these two stages—unity and diversity—together without neglecting one for the other, he shall become a true monotheist" (Amuli 1368a Sh, 116).

Muhyi l-Din also describes the stature of true monotheism in terms of integration (Jami 1370 Sh, 142):

> The perfect man should be present in every single moment of being like the Lord and this happens through the third spiritual voyage during which the mystic returns to the people from the Truth by Truth and thus human perfection and true certainty are attained. Thus conceived, the Last and the First are same both semantically and ontologically as they orchestrate the same symphony. (Ibn Turka 1378 Sh, 1:143)

*Wilaya* and True Certainty: it goes without saying that this stage of religiosity is not merely verbal and subjective but also requires a tremendous effort and re-divinization of human qualities: "This stature [*wilaya*] is the intuition of the divine essence from the perspective of unity and diversity as well as integration and disintegration" (Amuli 1368a Sh, 115).

## Probing into the Relationship of the Essence of Religion and the Essence of Religiosity
### Correspondence between the Stages of Religion and Religiosity

Having studied the essence of religion and its highest stage, i.e. *Haqiqa*, and having uncovered the essence of religiosity, i.e. *wilaya*, now it is time to conduct

a comparative analysis of their similarities to see whether there is a logical relationship between the highest stage of religion and loftiest stature of religiosity.

As I noted earlier, religion has three stages: Sharia, *Tariqa*, and *Haqiqa*. Moreover, religiosity consists of three statures: *risala*, *nubuwwa*, and *Wilaya*. Mystics hold that these stages are essentially interrelated. That is, a prophet who arrives at the stature of *wilaya* before his prophethood, and is now sent to his people has his own Sharia with respect to his *risala*, has his own *Tariqa* with respect to his *nubuwwa*, and finally has his own *haqiqa* with respect to his *wilaya* (Amuli 1368a Sh, 346, 367). Furthermore, a prophet who has not been delegated yet has his own *Tariqa* with respect to his prophecy and also has his own *Haqiqa* with respect to his *wilaya*. In a similar vein, a *wali* who does not have *risala* and *nubuwwa* only expresses the *Haqiqa*: "Prophets and messengers have the right to exoterically manipulate people upon the laws of Sharia and *wali* has the same right but esoterically" (Amuli 1367 Sh, 168).

To put the matter more explicitly, let us elaborate upon the gist of each of these as follows.

Identity in principle and distinction in manifestations: As the triple stages of religion are ontologically identical and are different in manifestations, the three statures of religiosity are also essentially identical and are different manifestations of the same truth. In religiosity, *wilaya* is the principle and origin of *nubuwwa* and *risala*. As I have mentioned before, in both religion and religiosity, people of integration are the chosen ones, indeed:

> It is not the case that companions of theological monotheism—prophets—and companions of ontological monotheism—*walis*, those who are of *wilaya*—are strange to the other kind of monotheism, since they simultaneously possess both of them. It should be said that the monotheism that they preach only represents the state of their mission. The first delegation—theological monotheism—is for the average people and the second delegation is dedicated to the chosen people. Although companions of *wilaya* seem to invite people to theological monotheism, their delegation is aimed at ontological monotheism. Integration as the target quality of both delegations requires both kinds of monotheism. (Amuli 1368a Sh, 87-88).

Correspondence between ontological realms: Sharia belongs to the terrestrial, *Tariqa* belongs to the angelic realm, and *Haqiqa* belongs to the realm of Allah. While *risala*, *nubuwwa*, and *wilaya* are related respectively to the material world, the angelic realm, and the divine realm. Thus, the correspondence between these triple stages becomes clear upon the logical relation of "equality of equals." Despite their semantic differences, these stages correspond to one another: "We are to demonstrate that messengers, prophets, and companions of *wilaya* are simultaneously vigilant toward Sharia, *Tariqa* and *Haqiqa* as these are three stations on the path on which mystics pace to reach perfection" (Amuli 1368a Sh, 367).

*Wilaya* and *Haqiqa*: both of these are void of otherness as they do not reside in the realm of diversity. They both represent the absolute unity of the realm of Allah. On this picture, *Haqiqa* is the matter and *wilaya* is its intuition. It is in this sense that *wilaya* is tributary to *Haqiqa*. *Wilaya* is the intuition of the noumenal truth that absorbs the intuiter in the divine essence and eternalizes him: "When the wayfarer becomes absorbed in the divine essence, he ascends to the stage of eternity wherein there is no sign of diversity" (Amuli 1368a Sh).

> It is as if *wilaya* is unification with *Haqiqa* or the very intuition of the true unity of the stage of *Haqiqa*. Then, true unity is materially *Haqiqa* and is intuitively *wilaya*. Moreover, the essences of religion and religiosity are not only correspondent but also unified, since both hinge upon the true literal unity. Otherwise put, the intuition of divine knowledge at the final stage of the second voyage will result in the absorption of the wayfarer in the divine essence and his eternity. Thus, this absorption and eternity is intuitive. Finally, it is necessary to note that the spirit of *wilaya* and *Haqiqa* is the absolute unity of the divine essence. The true wayfarer plays the role of a mirror that reflects the absolute unity of the Lord in an equivocal manner.

## Conclusion

Although the problematic of the "essence and shell of religion" is Occidental in its origin, we could find precise analyses of it in mystical doctrines. This requires an accurate understanding of the theoretical principles of Islamic mysticism. According to Islamic mysticism, each of religion and religiosity has its own independent reality, but they are deeply interwoven.

"Religion" has an absolute reality with three manifestations: Sharia, *Tariqa*, and *Haqiqa*. Sharia is a set of divine codes that address average minds. *Tariqa* is a set of moral etiquettes that are derived from Sharia for the chosen believers. Finally, *Haqiqa* represents the absolute unity of divine essence. These are different manifestations of the same truth. Their relationship should be viewed in terms of an exoteric/esoteric relation. These are essentially intertwined. The relationship is best understood when we compare the realm of evolution with the realm of codification. *Haqiqa* as the essential unity of the divine essence belongs to the realm of Allah where all diversities are reduced to unity in the great name of Allah.

"Religiosity" is an absolute reality with three manifestations: *risala*, *nubuwwa*, and *wilaya*. *Wilaya* is a direct intuition of the divine essence, which is attained by the perfect man. *Nubuwwa* is an angelically mediated relation of the prophet with the Lord that could be appropriated as *risala* if it takes a particular form for a special delegation. The relationship between these three manifestations is an exoteric/esoteric relation. Thus, the essence of religiosity is *wilaya*.

What happens in the stage of *wilaya* is the absorption of wayfarer in the divine essence and his eternity by the divine essence. The companion of *wilaya*

re-divinizes himself both qualitatively and attributively. That is, he sees the creation through the prism of unity. This intuition has its origin in the oneness of the divine name of Allah where there is no sign of diversity. After being united with the divine name of Allah, the wayfarer returns to his people to communicate to them the eternal truths. In this way, religiosity could be interpreted in existential terms. Although *wilaya* is the highest stage of all stages of religiosity, these stages are interdependent. *Wilaya* is the divine aspect of religiosity as *nubuwwa* is its angelic side and *risala* is its terrestrial face.

Thus, the triple stages of religion and religiosity are mutually correspondent. This is because *wilaya* is a cordial intuition of *Haqiqa*, Sharia is the content of the *risala* of messengers, and *Tariqa* is the quality of the prophet in his relation with the angelic realm. These divisions are clarified through ontological contemplations, because the realm of *Haqiqa* is the universal name of Allah, *Tariqa* and *nubuwwa* belong to the angelic realm, and Sharia and *risala* belong to the terrestrial monde. Although religion and religiosity are different categories, they are defined in relation to each other.

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