

The Qur'an and Mysticism On The Universe of Two Sides

Mohammad Taqi Faali¹

The universe has an exterior known as the material world and an interior called the "hereafter." So are the Qur'an and mankind. In other words, the universe, mankind and the Qur'an have hierarchical stages. The universe and mankind comprise the physical world, but the Qur'an constitutes the *Divine Law*. Since the origin of all three is one single source, one can say the former matches the latter, and all are manifestations of the divine Names "the Manifest" and "the Hidden." This idea has long been introduced in mysticism. Using the esoteric interpretation theory, Muslim mystics went for the view that the physical world (*takwin*) and the Holy Scripture (Book of Law, i.e. the Qur'an) are in perfect harmony. Therefore, it can be shown that Islamic mysticism is inspired by the Qur'an and is in fact a Qur'anic mysticism.

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Introduction

That the universe has an exterior and an interior is one of the deep ideas found in religious texts. The universe comes in hierarchical levels, the lowest of which is the *exterior*, and the higher ones are *interior* levels. This feature is not exclusive to the universe but is also found in the Qur'an and mankind. The Qur'an and mankind have exterior and interior levels, coming in hierarchical stages. The most interior stage of the universe, mankind, and the Qur'an is the nearest to the Origin Almighty.

The origin of the three is one unique being: God is the Creator of the universe and mankind and the Revealer of the Qur'an. Naturally, each level of the universe matches its corresponding stage in the

1. Associate Professor of Department of Islamic Mysticism, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, I.R.I., email: erfana@srbiau.ac.ir

Qur'an and in mankind. Thus, the exterior layer of the universe, namely the material world, corresponds with the exterior layer of mankind, namely the body, and with the exterior layer of the Qur'an, i.e. its apparent meaning. And so is the case with the interior levels. The deeper we understand the universe, the deeper we fathom the Qur'an and mankind. This vertical and happy journey will proceed stage by stage and station by station until the wayfarer returns back to the Origin. In other words, in their first step and descending arc, the universe, the Qur'an and mankind have come down into being from the Origin. The Qur'an reads: "All His command, when He wills something, is to say to it: 'let there be' and it is" (36:82).

The creation of mankind, the universe, and the Qur'an takes place through the divine command to "be." In their second step, however, the universe, the Qur'an, and mankind proceed to move towards Him. The Qur'an reads: "Indeed we belong to (have been created by) Allah, and to Him we do return" (2:156). Thus creation begins by the arc of descent and ends by the arc of ascent. This circular movement of the ascending arc from the Origin and the descending arc to the End correspond with each other. The Qur'an states, "He is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Hidden" (57:3).

The Interior Layer of the Universe

That the universe comes in hierarchical stages, each of which is exterior in relation to the one before it, can be understood from both philosophy and the Qur'an. This article will focus on the verses of the Qur'an related to this topic. When reading the Qur'an, one comes across various groups of verses that clearly indicate the exterior and interior layers of the universe.

- a) The first group is the verses referring to the concept of *malakut* (heavenly dominion). There are four verses in the Qur'an mentioning the heavenly dominion, one of which is mentioned in relation to Abraham: "Thus did we show Abraham the dominions of the heavens and the earth, that he might be of those who possess certainty" (6:75). It can be understood from this verse that (1) one cannot comprehend the heavenly dominion through ordinary senses; rather, one needs the vision of the heart, and (2) when one sees the heavenly dominion, one reaches certainty in which there is no room for doubt at all.

Malakut is the interior layer of *mulk* (corporeal dominion) and Allah is the owner of both: "Say, O' Allah, Master of all sovereignty" (3:26), "To Allah belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth" (5:120). God is the owner because he is the creator:

“Blessed is He in whose hands is all sovereignty, and He has power over all things. He who created death and life ... He created seven heavens in layers” (67:3).

The Qur'an teaches that God is the owner of everything. If one realizes this aspect of the universe, one will understand the heavenly dominion of the universe. No other aspect of the universe is more important than this aspect, which is its total dependence on Allah. Thus, the heavenly dominion is nothing but the world of the divine command; it is nothing but the interior layer of the world. If one reaches this layer, one reaches the level of absolute unity.

- b) The second category of verses concerns the “face” of God: “Everyone on it is ephemeral, yet lasting is the face of your Lord, majestic and munificent” (55:25-26). The content of this verse is similar to that of another verse: “Everything is to perish except His face” (28:88). The first verse attributes the verb “perish” to every man on the earth, but the second generalizes it to everything; both verses exclude the face of God from perishing. Considering the fact that the words “is ephemeral” and “perish” are in present tense, it can be concluded that everyone and everything is perished even now, if they are not the face of God. One's face is the part by which one encounters others. Divine names and Attributes (such as His knowledge, power, mercy, hearing, and so forth) are God's face by which He encounters all things other than Him. As a matter of fact, the face of God is identical with the interior dominion of the universe.
- c) The third group of verses clearly mention the interior and exterior layers of the universe: “They know just an outward aspect of the life of the world, but they are oblivious of the Hereafter” (30:7). The phrase “an outward aspect” indicates that this worldly life has an inward aspect, which, as the second part of the verse point to, is nothing but the hereafter. People of superficial observation fail to see anything beyond this transient world, while those with deep understanding see the interior of the universe, i.e. the hereafter, even though they are still in this world.

All the above verses together with the Light Verse “Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth” (25:35) lead us to this significant point that the transient world is the exterior layer of the universe, and its interior is the hereafter. There can be no exterior without something interior. This interior exists even now and dominates and encompasses the exterior. Therefore, the hereafter does not come after the material world in time, rather it is above and encompassing it even now. The

Qur'an reads: "And indeed Hell besieges the faithless" (29:54). Again, the verse is indicating that this siege is occurring now. And if the Hell besieges the faithless now, we can say that the Paradise is also embracing the pious now. Therefore, the hereafter is present now, constituting the interior of this material world.

The Interior Aspect of Mankind

In addition to the above verses suggesting that man has interior and exterior aspects, one may infer from many other verses that man is created in hierarchical stages and degrees.

- a) Human heart is characterized by the Qur'an as having characteristics such as faith (58:22), which are regarded as having hierarchal degrees: "And when His signs are recited to them they increase their faith" (8:2) and "O', you who have faith! Have faith" (4:136). The same point is true of *taqwa* (God-wariness); on the one hand, man's heart is characterized as the place for God-wariness: "They are the ones whose hearts Allah has tested for God-wariness" (49:3), and on the other hand, it is implied that God-wariness has hierarchal degrees: "O', you who have faith! Be wary of Allah with the wariness due to Him (2:102). This category of verses demonstrates that human heart constitutes his character, which has hierarchical degrees. And anything of hierarchical degrees has exterior and interior layers.
- b) The Qur'an mentions a kind of life called *hayat tayyibah* (good life): "Whoever acts righteously [whether] male or female, should he be faithful, we shall revive him with a good life" (16:97). Note that the verse does not state that God will "change" the life of the righteous into a good life; rather, it is said that the righteous will be "revived" with a good life. This means that the faithful who act righteously will be given life—which is good—and the others are not in fact living (Tabataba'i 1417AH, 12:341-43). The above verse is similar to the following one: "Is he who was lifeless then we gave him life and provided him with a light by which he walks among the people..." (6:122). Life has two characteristics: knowledge and power. Knowledge is the same light mentioned in the above verse. The power of the faithful is mentioned in other verses: "And it was a must for us to help the faithful" (30:47) and "Those who have faith in Allah and the Last Day and act righteously, they will have no fear nor will they grieve" (5:69). Therefore, the dead are of two kinds: the people of grave and the walking dead. The latter are the faithless by whose exterior body they may walk, but their interior spirit is dead. This is why they cannot listen or understand the right word. On the contrary, those

who have light are alive; they have stepped into their deep interior, which is the hereafter.

- c) Another group of verses speaks of the sealing of the heart: "Allah has set a seal on their heart and their hearing and there is a covering on their sight (2:7). In other verses, we read, "And we have cast veils on their heart lest they should understand it (6:25), "And we set a seal on their heart so they would not hear (7:100), and "Do they not contemplate the Qur'an, or are there locks on the hearts?"(47:24) This type of verses suggests that human understanding has both outward and inward dimensions. The former is shared by all human beings, but the latter is peculiar to those who have heart.
- d) Some verses of the Qur'an speak of ingesting fire: "Indeed those who consume the property of orphans wrongfully, only ingest fire into their bellies" (4:10). "Ingesting fire" in this verse does not have a metaphoric sense; rather, it indicates the inner reality of such acts (Tabataba'i 1417AH, 4:351). Another verse speaks of Hellfire as "the fire of Allah set ablaze, which overspreads the hearts" (104:7).

This category of verses also shows that both man and his acts have exterior and interior dimensions. The exterior of man's act can be seen here, but its interior will come to be known in the hereafter, "on the day when the secrets are examined" (86:9).

The Qur'an reads: "Renounce the outward-ness of sins and the inwardness thereof" (6:120) and "You shall not approach indecencies, what appears of them and what remains hidden" (6:151). It can be inferred from these two verses that sins and evil acts also have interior and exterior layers. If that is the case with sins, then the same is true of good acts (Tabataba'i 1417AH, 7:333). As a result, all acts, good or evil, have an exterior related to his physical dimension, and an interior hidden in his heart to be revealed in the hereafter. This is what the theory of *embodiment of deeds* teaches.

The Inwards Aspect of the Qur'an

The glorious Qur'an also has two aspects, interior and exterior. This can be inferred from many verses, including the ones indicating that the Qur'an has a state of detailed elaboration preceded by an undifferentiated and simple state. Chapter Hud begins as follows: "Alif Lam Ra, A Book whose signs have been fortified and then elaborated in details from One Who is all-wise and all-aware" (11:1). The Book here refers to the Qur'an in our hand. The significant point

here is that, according to this verse, the Qur'an has a state of simplicity and also a state of "elaboration in details" that comes after (denoted by the word *thumma* "then") the former. The latter is the state of plurality. The former is also called the "concealed" state, as indicated by 56:78 ("This is indeed a noble Qur'an, in a concealed Book") and also the state of *umm al-kitab* (the mother of the book), as mentioned in 13:39: "And with Him is the Mother of the Book." In sum, the state of detailed elaboration is the exterior state, but the simple and undifferentiated state is the interior one.

That the Qur'an has interior can be deduced, furthermore, from traditions. For instance, the exterior and interior layers of the Qur'an, Imam Sadiq (a) is reported to have said, "The exterior is what has been sent down and the interior is its esoteric interpretation. Some of it have passed and some have yet to come, it flows as the sun and the moon do" (quoted in Tabataba'i 1417AH, 3:71-73). In another tradition, we read that the Prophet (s) said:

He who assumes the Qur'an as his guide will be led to Paradise, but he who pays no heed to it will be taken to hellfire. It is the guide that leads to the best path. It is [a Book which contains] detailed elaboration, statement, accomplishment. It says the last word differentiating between the right and the wrong. It is not a jest. It has an exterior and interior; the former is the verdict and the latter is knowledge. Its apparent exterior is nice and its veiled interior is deep. (Quoted in Tabataba'i 1417AH, 3:71-73)

It can be concluded from what has been said so far that each of the universe, the Qur'an, and mankind has an exterior in this lower world and an interior in the higher worlds. The universe is the world of creation and the Qur'an is the world of Law; that these two worlds stand together in harmony is a profound teaching of the Qur'an. As mentioned earlier, the issue of exterior and interior layers is not peculiar to the above three, rather it covers human acts, as well. So is the case with God's bounties: "And He has showered upon you His bounties, the outward and the inward (31:20).

Another important issue in Islamic teachings is that knowledge is not an exception of the above rule. Mystics are of the view that knowledge is of two types: *acquired* and *hereditary*. The former is the ordinary knowledge attained gradually through teaching and learning with lots of efforts. The latter is the divine knowledge given to special people by God very easily, inwardly, and at once, which is the most useful knowledge. Imam Ali said, "Knowledge is of two kinds: the dispositional knowledge and the learned one. Were the former not there, the latter would be of no use" (Nahj al-balagha, wisdom 338).

The hereditary knowledge springs to the heart of those who have purified their heart from the impurity of immoral traits and the filth of animal character. Such people can openly see the secrets of the unseen world. This kind of knowledge comes directly from God, who is the Teacher of mankind: “We taught him a knowledge from our own (18:65).

Instead of terms “hereditary” and “acquired,” Sufis use the terms *narrated knowledge* and *comprehended knowledge* (Sarraj n.d., 26). What matters is that they consider the spiritual father as the teacher of hereditary knowledge (or comprehended knowledge). Based on a narration from the Prophet that says, “There are three fathers: one who brought you into being, one who brought you up, and one who taught you” (Amuli 1368 Sh, 503), the Sufis believe that prophets and infallible saints are the teacher of mysticism. The Sufi knowledge is the spiritual legacy of the spiritual father, which springs to the heart of a mystic.

Divine Law, Spiritual Way, and Truth

The Law also has an inward and an outward aspect; this is the result of above discussion and also inferred from the Qur'an and traditions. Apart from its exterior body, ritual prayer has an interior, which is remembering God: “Indeed the prayer prevents indecencies and wrong and the remembrance of Allah is surely greater” (29:45). Fasting also has an exterior, which is the abstinence from certain actions such as eating and drinking, and an interior, which is spiritual piety and inward God-wariness: “O you who have faith! Prescribed for you is fasting as it was prescribed for those who were before you, so that you may be God-wary” (2:183). This has led to the contrast between *Shariah* (the Law) and *Tariqah* (the Spiritual Way) in Islamic mysticism.

Sufis and mystics have defined *Law*, *Spiritual Way*, and *Truth* in different ways. Abu al-Qasim Qushayri says, “The Law is to abide by servitude, but the Truth is the vision of the Lord. It is not accepted for the Law to be unconfirmed by the Truth, or vice versa. The Law is the establishment of duties, and the Truth is the observation of the divinely predestined” (Qushayri n.d., al-Risalat al-Qushayriyya, 159). Hujwiri argues, “The Law is the correction of the outward (bodily behaviors) and the Truth is to safeguard the state of the inward (heart)” (Hujwiri 1926, 498).

In their words, the Sufis have corresponded the threefold issue of “Divine Law Spiritual Way and Truth” in one way or another (Amuli

1382 Sh, 6, 21, 22, 24, 25, 32, and 35). These three are demanded by three other things: the Law is demanded by messenger-hood, the Spiritual Way by prophet-hood, and the Truth by divine guardianship. Also, the Law concerns common people, the Spiritual Way concerns the elect servants, and the Truth concerns the select among the select. The Law is demanded by Islam, the Spiritual Way is demanded by faith, and the Truth is demanded by certainty. Similarly, disclosure relates to the Law, inspiration to the Spiritual Way concerns, and revelation to the Truth. Likewise, *'ilm al-yaqin* (certain knowledge), *'ayn al-yaqin* (the certainty itself), and *haqq al-yaqin* (the reality of certainty) are three stages of knowledge, depending on those three. The three worlds of *mulk* (corporeal world), *malakut* (heavenly dominion), and *jabarut* (majestic dominion) and the other three worlds of senses, souls, and intellects also go along with the Law, the Spiritual Way and the Truth. Such trinities are implied by the trinity in creation—mystics are of the view that creation begins from unity toward trinity and thence toward the world of plurality.

In a nutshell, rules of Law and religious obligations have an exterior appearing in the Law and an interior appearing in the Spiritual Way and still a deeper interior manifesting itself in the Truth. For instance, formal hajj has an exterior that consists of all the rituals and laws recorded in the manuals of Islamic law. However, in the spiritual hajj, all the rituals find a spiritual dimension, and its purpose becomes unity with the Perfect Man or Macro-Anthropos. Whereas the formal hajj is centered on the physical Ka'bah in Mecca, the spiritual hajj is centered on the spiritual Ka'bah, which is the soul of the Macro-Anthropos. He who goes after the former may perform the exterior rites of Hajj, yet fail to attain its spirit.

The Universe of Two Sides in Mysticism

Although Sufism has borrowed some of its first themes and principles from outside of the world of Islam, this does not mean that we do not have “Islamic mysticism.” And even though some apparent inconsistencies may exist between Islamic and Sufi teachings as a result of these borrowed elements, they can be resolved by means of esoteric interpretation.

Moreover, Sufism depends on inward experience or “taste,” which is a personal experiences. And Sufis have expressed their experiences through encrypted conceptions and metonymy, so much so that Sufism can be regarded as a discipline of secret and symbolic knowledge. This has further led to misunderstandings and apparent inconsistencies with Islamic or rational thought, which reinforces the importance of esoteric interpretation.

Ibn Arabi was one of the greatest figures who used esoteric interpretation. He lived in a time of conflict between Christians and Muslims, on the one hand, and between Muslims of different schools of thought, on the other hand. The circumstances of his time made him strive for the unity of Muslims. For this purpose, he offered symbolic interpretation of religion to lessen the conflicts. Ibn Arabi's theory of *great instructor* or his principle of *guardianship* can be assessed against this context. Furthermore, symbolic interpretation was a means for Ibn Arabi to explain the discrepancies and ambiguities in Sufi legacy he had received (Nasr 1972, 97-103).

Esoteric interpretation, in Ibn Arabi point of view, was not only to explain the ambiguous Qur'anic verses based on the clear ones—as can be seen in the Qur'anic commentary attributed to him—but also a philosophical method for “harmonizing the existence, mankind, and Scripture.” Still, his project needed a medium, which was provided by the world of Imagination. That world could resolve many of the contradictions, such as the relation of God to the sensible world, the connection of the eternal to the temporal, the connection of the permanent to the temporary, the connection of the perfect to the imperfect, the connection of the absolute to the limited, the issue of unity and plurality, and the issue of predetermination and free-will. Ibn Arabi was of the view that, through this mediating world, he could solve those inconsistencies (Corbin 2006, 33-77; Ibn Arabi n.d., 1:304, 2:129, 3:518), especially considering that the world of imagination had Qur'anic origination.

Ibn Arabi applied his interpretation to three fields: reality, Scripture and mankind. The issue of an intermediate world played a significant role with regard to the first—i.e., the reality and the universe. He considered some hierarchical stages for the universe and used the “interpretation of existence” for it. The higher layers of the world reaches Unity, and ascension to those levels reveals the interior layer of the world.

Mankind also is capable of interpretation (Ibn Arabi n.d., 1:120-21, 2:70) Mankind consists of two apparently incompatible elements. From one side, man has an interior similar to the image of God, and, from another side, he has an exterior consisting of a material form. Because of the former, mankind becomes qualified for the status of divine successorship; the latter, however, is apparently incompatible with the divine aspect.

Ibn Arabi held that the issue of manifestation removes the problem. All entities, whether from the upper layers of the world or from the

lower layers, are the manifestations of one of the divine Names. Hence, the universe is nothing but signs, manifestations, or rather the very holy Name of the Truth Almighty. Inconsistencies are no more than oppositions among the contrasting names which will disappear by the authority of the all-comprehensive Name or the Perfect man.

The Qur'an needs esoteric interpretation as well. It is improbable in all writings of Ibn Arabi to find even one page without the interpretation of several verses. Ibn Arabi's exegesis includes even the verses that relate to the law, as can be seen at the end of his *Futuhat*. He also has a long discussion on the interpretation of the Separate Letters. He believes that the Qur'an is a Book of codes that need to be decoded.

Ibn Arabi argues that the universe, mankind, and revelation form a trinity, whose elements suggest inward and existential truths. At whatever stage one maybe, one may encounter some parallel stage of the universe and the Scripture. Accordingly, the layers and stages of reality, mankind and the Qur'an interconnect overlap and match one another.

Conclusion

One deep religious idea is that the universe (creation) stands in hierarchical levels. Mankind is also of interior and exterior stages. So is the Qur'an. This issue can be vindicated by the verses of the Qur'an.

Theoretical mysticism includes in itself the theory of esoteric interpretation, which is a proper method to justify mystical theories. Having been applied to the universe, mankind, and the Qur'an, interpretation takes the unveiling to the farthest layers of existence. The theory of interpretation provides us with a comprehensive explanation as to the existence of mankind and Scripture.

The discussion in this article made it clear that (1) the Law and all its rulings are of inward and outward dimensions, (2) different disciplines of knowledge may sometimes deal with the exterior and other time with the interior aspects, (3) man's hierarchical stages correspond to the vertical levels of the existence and of the Qur'an, and (4) there is only one single way for one to discover the interior layers of the universe and the Qur'an, and that is through discovering one's interior self.

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