

The Origin of Islamic Mysticism in the Light of the Personal Unity of Existence

Ebrahim Rezaei,¹ Jafar Shanazari²

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The question of the origin of Islamic mysticism has been one of the major concerns of many researchers in the field of mysticism in the recent decades. Some have maintained that Islamic mysticism is an imported product: a combination of Eastern spiritual traditions or a mixture of Manichaeism and Alexandrian philosophy. However, in order to find out the real origin of Islamic mysticism, the best way is to investigate the main questions of Islamic mysticism and to trace them in the Islamic culture and tradition. Reflecting on the personal unity of existence, the most important principle of Islamic mysticism, the author shows that Muslim mystics have been so inspired by the teachings of the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet and the Imams that there remains no need to look for the origin of Islamic mysticism outside the Muslim tradition.

Keywords: Personal Unity of Existence, Manifestation, Islamic Mysticism, The Oneness Of God, Encompassing Distinction.

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1. Assistant Professor of Ahl al-Bayt and Quranic Studies, University of Isfahan, Iran (e.rezaei@ahl.ui.ac.ir), corresponding author.
 2. Associate Professor of Philosophy and Islamic Theology, University of Isfahan, Iran (j.shanazari@ltr.ui.ac.ir).

Introduction

One of the questions that have occupied the minds of many scholars is the question of the origin of Islamic mysticism. Is Islamic mysticism an imported phenomenon, or is it a product of the Muslim tradition, formed by various Islamic constituents?

On this subject, different views and ideas have been suggested, which can be divided, in a general way, into two groups:

1. The views of those who look for the origin of Islamic mysticism beyond the borders of the Muslim tradition. Some believe that Islamic mysticism was taken from Christian mysticism (Davani 1381 Sh, 72); in the view of these people, it was Christian mysticism, reflected in monasticism that surfaced in the name of Sufism. The main evidence offered by this group is the common concepts between the Islamic and Christian mystic traditions, such as asceticism, trust, remembrance, silence, and divine love. Some others believe that Islamic mysticism was taken from Indian mysticism, especially the Upanishads. The evidence they offer is also the common concepts between the two traditions, such as annihilation, personal unity, the way of purifying of the soul, and introspection (Badawi 1381 Sh, 35). A third group holds that Islamic mysticism is grounded in Neoplatonism, following the acquaintance of Muslim scholars with the Greek philosophy and the thoughts of Plotinus in particular (40). Some others have also looked for the roots of Islamic mysticism in Persian and Zoroastrian mysticism and Pahlavi philosophy (31).

2. The view that Islamic mysticism has a genuine origin and is rooted in Islamic sources and teachings. Surveying the Islamic tradition makes one familiar with a great amount of theoretical and practical teachings and fascinating spiritual paradigms that could have easily led to the development of mysticism among Muslims (Badawi 1381 Sh, 44-48).

In this article, we attempt to show that there are so many references to knowledge and spiritual wayfaring in the holy Qur'an and the

Prophetic tradition that one cannot but attribute the origin of Islamic mysticism to the Islamic tradition itself. Therefore, in order to study the evidence and to prove the Islamic origin of Islamic mysticism, we will have a look at the viewpoint of the Muslim revelation on the most fundamental and important teaching of Islamic mysticism, the *personal unity of existence*, to show that not only the revelation endorses the teachings of Islamic mysticism but also it has inspired Muslim mystics in advancing the doctrine of personal unity, which is the foundational ground for other mystical teachings, such as the Perfect Man and the order of the world of existence.

For this purpose, first, the holy Qur'an and traditions, which we believe were the main sources of Islamic mysticism, are surveyed. Then, the doctrine of the personal unity of existence, the answers to the objections made to it, and some of its technical terms (such as the *absoluteness of the divisible, manifestation and appearance, and encompassing distinction*) are discussed. Finally, with reference to these mentioned terms, we study the evidence in the holy Qur'an and tradition in support of the personal unity of existence.

Revelation in the View of Muslim Mystics

It is important to discuss the view of Muslim mystics on the Qur'an and tradition in order to show the way mystics employed the holy Book and tradition and their criteria in evaluating the validity of their beliefs.

Muslim mystics have introduced certain criteria for assessing the truth or falsehood of their teachings:

1. The unveiling of the mystic. A criterion for mystical knowledge is the unveiling and intuition of the mystic. Yet, in order to verify the intuitions, the supervision of a mentor or master of *wayfaring* is necessary.
2. The Intellect. The intellect illuminated by the light of the heart that is free from impurities is itself a clear criterion for assessing the truth or falsehood of the mystical findings.

3. Revelation. From the viewpoint of mystics, the most essential instrument for identifying the truth or falsity of the mystical knowledge is the revelation. In mysticism, the essential means of receiving the truth is unveiling and intuition; the purer the soul, the purer the intuition and the higher the degree of its representation of the reality. On the other hand, among human souls, the souls of the prophets are the purest; and among the prophets, the purest soul is the soul the Seal of the Prophets, for he possessed the most perfect and balanced physical and spiritual temperance (Qaysari 1381 Sh, 101); therefore, his insights and intuitions were the most perfect. Thus, mystics hold that the holy Qur'an is the most perfect revelation and that all mystical unveilings and perceptions are to be measured against the standard of the holy Qur'an and the traditions of the Propheta and the Imams. On the difference between true intuitions and void fancies, Qaysari writes that there are certain standards for distinguishing a true unveiling from a mere fancy, among them "the holy Qur'an and Prophetic hadith, which are the perfect Muhammadan unveilings" (111).

Understanding the Concept of the Oneness of Existence

The oneness of existence means that existence is confined to the One, and at the same time it is a kind of unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity. This is not what is maintained in Transcendental Philosophy, where unity refers to the origin of existence and diversity to its degrees; rather, existence is one reality, which is also the only degree of existence, appearing in diverse appearances and manifestations. Therefore, the diverse beings are not chimeras or illusions but manifestations of the Real, and their being representations is the only basis of their reality.

Since diverse beings are the manifestations and representations of the Real, they are not void or illusory, though when considered by themselves, they are no more than illusions. It is only when they are seen as signs and mirrors that they become representations of the Real. According to this view, unity and existence are essentially interrelated:

oneness is the attribute of existence, and existence is associated with oneness. In this regard, Ibn Arabi writes: “Whenever you look at existence in an analytic and general way, you understand that unity is its permanent companion and associate” (Ibn Arabi 1370 Sh, 63).

In order to explain this point further, it is important to have a brief look at the basic parts of the argument for the personal unity; namely, absoluteness of the divisible, manifestation and appearance, and encompassing distinction.

1. Absoluteness of the Divisible

Mystics maintain that the Exalted Real is not qualified by any determination or restriction. They ask, what is in the Real that sustains its essence? Is He sustained by its knowledge, manifestation, or hiddenness? In their view, the divine essence is not to be qualified by any determination or limitation. For example, the name Manifest is against the name Hidden. If we say that He has only the name Manifest, then He is not Hidden, and if we say that He has only the name Hidden, He is not Manifest. Therefore, manifestation and hiddenness are restrictions and determinations. The Exalted Real in the position of essence is absolute and free from manifestation, hiddenness, knowledge, or any other restriction. Otherwise, the Exalted Real could not be present both in the position of manifestation and in the position of hiddenness. If He is present everywhere, He cannot be present in one place and absent in another. The quality of the *absoluteness of the divisible* keeps the Essence free from any particular determination.

2. Manifestation and Appearance

As was said, the Exalted Real is *existence qua existence*, and His reality is an absolute reality without any determination, Absolute by the absoluteness of the divisible. In this sense, when we refer to the state of the essence of the Real, we should say that it is a state with no determination, a state of absoluteness that has the unity of absoluteness. Therefore, in the state of the essence, there is no determination. Now, the question is how determinations appear.

In the discussion on manifestation and appearance, we initially answer the question of how the Absolute Being appears in the form of determinations by saying that, according to mystics, in the position of the absoluteness of the divisible, there is no *particular determination*; that is, in that position, the determination by the name Knowledge, for example, is not distinct from the determination by the name Power, and neither one of them is prior to the other, so one cannot say that His identity is either Knowledge or Power. However, according to mystics, the essence of the Real has certain states, such as hiddenness and manifestation, and what is hidden becomes manifest. Notwithstanding, in all states, all manifestations are Himself. There is indeed no more than one entity that accepts all these states. When the merging states and relations here turn into entities—that is, when they become manifest—they accept the terms particular to them. Hence, the question of manifestation and appearance gains importance. Mystics argue that in the state of the essence, all manifestations exist, but there is no determination. However, as soon as they leave the essence, they are determined and separate from each other. Considering the above-mentioned points, it can be said that manifestation occurs when the Absolute becomes qualified and accepts determination: “The Absolute becomes determined through one of the determinations” (Ibn Turka 1360 Sh, 158).

3. Encompassing Distinction

Mystics have explicit words on the identity of God and beings: “Truly, the Real is the reality of every known object” (Qaysari 1381 Sh, 1086); “Glorified is He who has manifested the things, while He is their reality” (Ibn Arabi n.d., 2:459). For mystics, the essence is indeed in the heart of everything, and, therefore, it is the reality of all things, since manifestation means “the Absolute becoming qualified” (Davani 1381 Sh, 158); the Absolute exists in the heart of every qualification. So, in all these contexts, it is said that the Glorified Real is the reality of all things.

One may ask now, what kind of reality this is. Is the reality in our discussion the same as the conventional reality, or it is another kind of

reality with its own terms and corollaries? Because mystics see in the conventional definition of reality certain terms which do not exist in mystical reality, they concluded that reality needs explanation. In other words, what is meant when it is said that the Exalted Real is the reality of all things but at the same time different from them? It is the answer to these questions that contributed to the formation of *encompassing distinction* theory. According to this theory, all realities are the manifestations of the Real. Now, what is the difference between the Exalted Real, the creatures, and beings?

Evidently, this discussion is very serious, for the belief in the identity between God and creatures is explicitly against the Qur'anic verse "There is nothing like Him" (Qur'an 42:11), and Muslim mystics, who believe that they are the spiritual children of the Prophet, do not accept such a view and strongly stand against it. Rather, they believe in two kinds of distinction: *oppositional* distinction and *encompassing* distinction (Ibn Turka 1361 Sh, 125).

The oppositional distinction is the distinction between two things which have distinct accidents, such as length, color, and weight. In the oppositional distinction, one of the two sides has a feature which the other does not have, and vice versa. Sa'in al-Din holds that this distinction is particular to those accidents which are superadded to the essence (Ibn Turka 1361 Sh, 125). On the other hand, the encompassing distinction should not be understood as absolute separation between God and the creatures. Here, the difference is not oppositional; since the Real has the absoluteness of the divisible, He is the reality of all things, for the Absolute is in the heart of all things, and things exist by His qualifying relational aspect.

But this identity does not mean that the Real is, for example, only a tree, for although He is the reality of the tree because of this absoluteness, He is not a tree or anything else because of the same absoluteness.

From the above, we may infer that the difference between God and creatures is not a difference of separation or division. If there is even a

difference, it is a difference in attribute, for one is Encompassing and Absolute and the other is encompassed and restricted. The beautiful explanation of Ali, the Commander of the Faithful, in *Nahj al-balaghah*, reveals a difference in attribute, rather than a difference of separation between the Real and the creatures: “He is with things, but not by way of fusion; and He is other than them, but not by way of separation” (Nahj al-balaghah, Sermon 1).

The Personal Unity of Existence from the Perspective of the Qur’an and Traditions

In this section, we quote and discuss some of the verses of the Qur’an and traditions, which have certainly inspired Muslim mystics in their spiritual wayfaring and have been used as a touchstone for identifying the validity of their mystical experiences. These verses and traditions can be divided into different groups, and from each group a key expression can be extracted as follows:

1. “The Face of God”

Before discussing and analyzing this expression, it would be illuminating to discuss the third verse of Sura al-Hadid, in which contradictory attributes are ascribed to God: “He is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Hidden, and He is aware of everything” (Qur’an 57:3). Knowing that the pronoun “*huwa*” (He) before adjectives indicates restriction, the right way to interpret this verse is to say that both aspects of manifestation and hiddenness are God Himself. Therefore, there is no distinction between Him and the beings of the hidden world and the manifest world to speak of a causal relationship. It is only He who is seen in the two realms of manifestation and hiddenness. From a conventional perspective, things are manifest and God is hidden, whereas in the view of the mystic, God is both the apparent side of things and also their hidden side, which is their imaginal, intellectual, and nominal forms. Therefore, no matter whether our perception is sensory or intuitive, it is not the thing itself or its graded and intensified aspects that are perceived; rather, both kinds of knowledge, so far that the heart of the mystic is present, are the knowledge of God, as He is the Absolute indivisible existence. On the

basis of this interpretation, “the Face of God” is the very presence of the Real, which pervades all existence: “To Allah belong the east and the west: so whichever way you turn, there is the face of Allah! Allah is indeed All-Embracing, All-Knowing” (Qur’an 2:115). From this verse, one may infer that both the immaterial and material worlds are owned by God, and accordingly everywhere is the place and manifestation of His “Face.” This ownership, which is real ownership, necessitates an *illuminating relationship* between the owner and the owned, rather than a relationship in which the owned has an independent existence from the owner as in causal relationship. In other words, there is an illuminating relationship between God and creatures in the sense that creatures are one of the existential aspects of God, rather than being independent and parallel entities. It is because of this pervasive existence that God is called “All-Embracing,” which refers to both the vast domain of the essence of the Real and the vastness of His existence. Following this vastness, God is aware of everything, and thus He is called All-Knowing. Such attributes make it necessary that we understand the relationship between God and creatures as one of manifestation. In other words, the abode of being is the manifestation of God, whose simple and vast presence manifests Himself, in a secret way, to Himself.

Moreover, the verse “Everything is perishing except His Face” (Qur’an 28:88) suggests a mystical intuition where the objectivity of the world of creation and command (in other words, everything) vanishes and is replaced by the All-Embracing existence of the Real, which is called “the Face of God.” This mystical experience, which manifests the annihilation of all things and, in a sense, the flow of the Real, is the concern and occupation of the People of God. Imam Ali says in this regard, “I have never seen a thing except that I saw God before it, after it, within it, and along with it” (Attar n.d., 1: 258). To see God before and after and within and along with a thing indicates that the mystic in the domain of plurality (things) seeks the Exalted Real, and through his genuine experience dissolves the diversity in the glory of the oneness of His existence.

2. The Oneness of the Real

What kind of oneness is the unity that is attributed to God? Is it similar to the unity that is attributed to other things, or is the oneness of the Real a different kind of unity?

One of the most significant distinctions made in the Islamic tradition is the distinction between uniqueness and oneness. In the language of mystics, one refers to a single being, which is divisible and can be multiplied and followed by an infinite chain of numbers, whereas the unique can neither be divided nor followed by other numbers. Therefore, Muslim mystics hold that the unity of oneness is numerical unity, but the unity of uniqueness is the true and real unity. The first kind of unity contains plurality, but the second kind of unity indicates pure unity, and, thus, it is confined to the existence of the Exalted Real.

Therefore, when it is mentioned in the holy Qur'an that "there is no secret conference of three but He is their fourth, nor of five but He is their sixth, nor of less than that or more but He is with them wheresoever they may be" (Qur'an 58:7), the verse refers to the oneness and might of God, which are compatible with His name "All-Embracing," rather than the Exalted Real being added to a group and adding to its number. The verse means that there is no plurality except that it is obliterated by the power and dominance of the unity of the Real. This description confirms perfectly well the view of the encompassing distinction emphasized by Muslim mystics. Therefore, "those who say Allah is the third of the three are disbelievers" (Qur'an 5:73), for the trinity means that God is one, beside other "ones." Therefore, to bring the two verses together, it should be said that the encompassing distinction dominates the relation between the Real and creatures; that is, while God encompasses all things by His *mighty unity*, He is distinct from them and transcends them.

At the end of this discussion, it is important to mention the four meanings of "one" from the perspective of Imam Ali. Answering the question of an Arab during the Battle of the Camel regarding the oneness of God, the Imam offered four meanings for the oneness of God, two of which may be attributed to God, whereas the other two may

not be attributed to Him. The two meanings which can be attributed to God are “the one with no likeness or similitude” and “the one which is indivisible” (whether in existence, the intellect, or the fancy). The two which cannot be ascribed to God are the “numerical one,” as presupposed in the trinity, and the “conceptual one” as the oneness of the genus or species (Saduq 1398 AH, 83).

In this sense, the unity of God is a kind of unity beyond the chain of numbers, whether in respect of progression or in respect of divisibility. Therefore, God is unique in the sense that He has no likeness or similitude: “There is nothing like Him” (Qur’an 42:11). Thus, uniqueness is the indivisible existence that repels any other being from His domain. The force and firmness of the mentioned uniqueness in the first verse of the Sura al-Ikhlās (Qur’an 112) is so strong that the Muslim mystic finds no way other than holding the theory of absoluteness of the divisible.

3. “Venous Closeness”

In one verse of the holy Qur’an, there is a deep expression on the relation and distance between the Exalted Real and His servants, which cannot be understood except in a state of unveiling and mystical meditation: “We have created man and We know what his soul tempts him to, and We are closer to him than the jugular vein” (Qaf 16). Here the jugular vein is a figure of speech that indicates all the things that are close to man. So, the verse indicates that God is closer to man than anything close to man. The supplement to the meaning of *venous closeness* is to be found in Sura al-Mulk: “Does He know not what He has created, and He is the Subtle and the Aware” (Qur’an 67:14). According to this verse, God is the “Subtle” and the “Aware,” encompassing by His knowledge all His creation; since He is Subtle, He knows the interior aspect of things; and because He is Aware, He knows their exterior aspect. However, the knowledge of God is not separate from His existence, so His existence too pervades the interior and exterior of all things. It is because of this extreme closeness that the existential distance between the Real and creatures fades away, and the

relation of causality between the two is replaced by that of “manifestation.” This point is explained most eloquently in the words of Imam Ali: “He has soared so high that there is nothing higher than Him, and He has come so near that there is nothing nearer than Him” (Nahj al-balaghah, Sermon 49). In this concise statement, Imam Ali brings together the transcendence and immanence of God. Moreover, in the following statement, the Imam speaks of God’s absoluteness of the divisible: “He is in all things, but neither merged with them, nor separate from them” (Kulayni 1365 Sh, 1:138). The Real is all things, and not one or a group of things to be countable or divisible. His existence has absoluteness of the divisible; if He was this or that thing (“merged with them”), He would be a thing; and if He was absolutely distinct from things (“separate from them”), He would be none of them. The distinction between the Real and creatures is of the kind of *difference by attributes*, and, therefore, creatures cannot be separate from the Real, though the Real exists and can remain separate from the creatures: “for Allah is independent of the creatures” (Qur’an 3:97).

So, the expression “jugular vein” is made complete by the notion of the *companionship* of the Exalted Real with the creatures, which is its philosophical expression: “He is with you wherever you are” (Qur’an 57:4). This companionship, which is preceded by the state of absolute hiddenness, should never be understood as a “comparison” between the Real and the creature: “He is with every thing but not by comparison, and different from every thing but not through separation” (Nahj al-balaghah, Sermon 1). In the state of absolute hiddenness, according to a Prophetic hadith, “God was, and nothing was with Him” (Majlisi 1404 AH, 1: 198).

4. “The High in Ranks”

On the manifestation and appearance of the Real in the divine graded order, a verse in Sura al-Ghafir is an indisputable evidence: “Call upon Allah while making your religion pure for Him though the disbelievers dislike it. He is High in ranks and is the owner of the throne” (Qur’an 40:14-15). In this verse, the divine name “High in Ranks” attributes to God high degrees. Some argue that what is intended in this holy verse

by “High in Ranks” is “He Who elevates the ranks”; that is, God raises the ranks of humans. Qaysari, however, comments that it is because of the names and acts of God that the degrees of existence are raised (Qaysari 1381 Sh, 13). Whether in the level of the interior or that of the exterior, the degrees are the loci of the manifestation of divine names.

5. The Unity of Acts

In the tradition of Islamic mysticism, there are three kinds of unity, which result from three kinds of annihilation: *unity of Essence*, which is the result of the annihilation of the mystic in the Essence and his total unawareness of diversity; *unity of attributes*, which results from the annihilation of the mystic in divine attributes and his referring all attributes and names manifest in the world to the attributes and names of the Exalted Real; and *unity of acts*, emerging when the mystic sees no action in the abode of nature other than that of the Real. In the last level, which shows the annihilation of the mystic in the divine actions, the mystic does not see God as the final cause or as the head of the chain of causes; rather, he sees God in every action and its enactment.

Therefore, when God ascribes to Himself the act of “throwing,” He guides the Prophet and his followers to the unity of acts: “You did not shoot when you shot, but it was Allah Who shot” (Qur’an 8:17). By denying the causal agency of the Prophet and ascribing it to God, this verse indicates the presence of the Exalted Real in the same place where the act of shooting took place. The same notion is also seen in the following verses: “Do they know not that it is Allah Who accepts the repentance of His servants and takes the alms,” (Qur’an 9:124), and “Take from their riches alms to purify them and make them grow” (Qur’an 9:103). According to the first verse, it is God Who takes the alms, whereas the second verse indicates that it is the Prophet who receives the alms.

Therefore, although the agency of the Prophet is not denied, it is made clear that with the presence of the Exalted Real in all places and positions, including the place of the soul of the Messenger of God, the true agent of taking alms is God. Likewise, it is only God Who provides

for creatures: “Truly it is Allah who is the Provider and he is the Powerful, the Strong” (Qur’an 51:58). Once again in this verse, the pronoun “*huwa*” (He) indicates the confinement of the attribute of “providing” to God. As is implied in the verse, only God is the “Provider”; no earthly creature or angel (e.g., Israfil, who is known to be the heavenly agent of provision and providing) could be the true Provider. This points to the notion of the absoluteness of the divisible, since it indicates that God has occupied all the places of creatures, and in a hidden way He does whatsoever He likes.

In the same way, the glorious aspects, negative sides, and even Satanic forces also belong to God: “He who seeks glory, truly all glory belongs to Allah” (Qur’an 4:139), and “When we intend to destroy a city, we order its rich and they will do evil in it. Then it will deserve our punishment and we will destroy it completely” (Qur’an 17:16). This verse clearly states that the order to do evil is also issued by God. In another verse, the name “Planner” is attributed to God: “They planned but Allah is the best planner” (Qur’an 3:54). According to these verses, both aspects of glory and evil in existence are absolutely divine, and even Satanic powers which tempt people to deviation and mischief are in the hand of the Real. Therefore, the verse “You will not unless Allah wills” (Qur’an 76:30) indicates that, according to the unity of acts, in the position where man does the deed voluntarily, it is the will and the desire of the Real that is manifested, as is attested by the Prophet (reported by Imam al-Sadiq): “He who imagines that God commands evil and corruption indeed lies about God, and he who thinks that good and evil occur without the will of God has denied His domination, and he who thinks that sins are committed without the divine power also lies about God. And he who lies about God, God will place him in hell” (Kulayni 1365 Sh, 1: 159).

Conclusion

Considering the evidence presented in this article, we may infer that Islamic mysticism has its roots in the words and actions of the leaders of Islam, rather than in other faith traditions, such as Christianity or Hinduism. Although it takes time and effort to prove that mystical

traditions define their particular practices and customs according to their particular religious law and rites, it can be argued that Islamic mysticism is indebted to the Qur'an and Islamic tradition, and the theory of the personal unity of existence in Islamic mysticism is, no doubt, the best evidence to support this claim.

From the perspective of Muslim mystics, the three fundamental notions of absoluteness of the divisible, manifestation, and encompassing distinction stand against such ideas as the incarnation, the trinity, and the notion that existence is illusory. Moreover, the verses and traditions show that unity, existence, and manifestation are all attributed to God.

In a similar way, concepts such as the face of God, the word of the Exalted Real, venous closeness, the most High in Ranks, and unity of acts confirm what we have said. Although the contribution and role of the mystics of other religions in keeping the continuity of the path and demonstrating the truth cannot be ignored, we should admit that if the goal of mysticism is to realize the oneness of existence in the soul and spirit of the believers, Islamic mysticism has had a genuine contribution in this regard.

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