

## Unity and Plurality of Religions from the perspectives of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamedānī and ‘Azīz al-Dīn Nasafī

Saba Fadavi<sup>1</sup>, Mohiyeddin Ghanbari<sup>2</sup>

Received: 18 March 2022 / Accepted: 15 May 2023

### Abstract

The plurality of religion has been approached from different perspectives, including the mystical approach adopted by few Muslim mystics in terms of the socio-political conditions of their time. Two prominent mystics of the middle centuries of Islam are noteworthy here: ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī and ‘Azīz al-Dīn al-Nasafī. In the present study, the thoughts of these two mystics will be compared, and their respective approaches to the unity and plurality of religions will be examined in a comparative-analytical manner. It is also shown that while both mystics acknowledge the existence of a common principle in all religions, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt used his hermeneutic views to argue that errors in language and translation have contributed to the plurality of religions, while al-Nasafī draws upon the theory of the unity of existence to substantiate plurality in words as well as belief in an invented god. On the other hand, since they accept spiritual experiences and collective wisdom as criteria for the accuracy of religions, both mystics have attempted to show why spiritual experiences, which are rooted in a divine reality, have changed and become distorted over time.

**Keywords:** Sufism, plurality of religions, unity of religions, spiritual experiences, religious beliefs.

### A. Introduction

Plurality of religion is an indisputable fact, which has been considered by different scholars for a long time. However, it gained greater attention as a major issue in religious studies during the Age of Enlightenment. Since then, scholars explored the phenomenon through various phenomenological, historical, and comparative approaches. There are different ways to approach the plurality of religions, of which the philosophical approach may be divided into three general categories: (1) a negative approach to the existence of a divine reality and the truth of religious claims, (2) a relativistic approach to the truth of religions, and disbelief in the existence of a single truth in various religions, and (3) a realistic view of religions in which the existence of a divine reality is

1. Ph.D. in Mysticism and Sufism, Semnan University, Iran. Email: [fadavis@semnan.ac.ir](mailto:fadavis@semnan.ac.ir)

2. Assistant Professor, Islamic Azad university of Neyshabur, Iran. Email: [drghanbari\\_m@gmail.com](mailto:drghanbari_m@gmail.com)

© The Author(s) 2023. Published by University of Religions and Denominations Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) licence, which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

endorsed (Runzo 1988, 351-57). The third category is in turn divided into three subcategories: *religious exclusivism*, *religious inclusivism*, and *religious pluralism* (Basinger 2020, 13; Abbasi 2008, 132).

The present study approaches the issue of religious diversity from the perspective of Muslim mystics, taking into account the above three philosophical approaches. The significance of this study lies in its demonstration of how early mystics paved the way for peaceful coexistence and conflict resolution by promoting direct encounters and interactions between different religious traditions. To this end, two prominent mystics, ‘Ayn al-Qudāt al-Hamadānī (d. 1131) and ‘Azīz al-Dīn al-Nasafī (d. circa 1300) have been selected for a case study on religious diversity in Islamic mysticism. They were among the few Muslim scholars who paid particular attention to this issue. This study aims to conduct a comparative examination of the accounts provided by ‘Ayn al-Qudāt Hamadānī and ‘Azīz al-Dīn al-Nasafī for the plurality and unity of religions. We scrutinize their approach to the diversity and plurality of religions and delineate the similarities and differences in their thought.

To date, significant research has been conducted on religious diversity from religious, philosophical, and mystical perspectives. Within the field of Islamic mysticism, there is an article titled “The study of religious pluralism from a mystical perspective and its implications in religious training” that presents mystical pluralism as the most proper approach to address the diversity and plurality of religions. This approach has educational implications from a religious perspective (see Shamshiri and Mir 2018). Furthermore, in an article titled “The study of religious pluralism in Rumi’s *Masnavi*,” Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī’s account of religious pluralism is explored, arguing that even though Rūmī acknowledges multiple religions, he does not embrace the modern notion of religious pluralism, ultimately maintaining that there is only one true religion (see Mashidi and Farzaneh 2012). Another article “Matter of beliefs: an examination of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s stances towards diversity of religions” explores Ibn al-‘Arabī’s perspective on religious pluralism, suggesting that long before John Hick, several Muslim mystics acknowledged the plurality of religions (see Hosseini 2019). Moreover, two independent articles titled “Proximity view of ‘Ayn al-Qudāt al-Hamadānī through various schools” and “Religious pluralism in Azīz al-Dīn Nasafī’s book *The perfect man*” have examined al-Hamadānī’s and al-Nasafī’s approaches to the plurality of religions and sects (see Yazdani 2013; Zargaran and Qulamhosseinzadeh 2016). That said, to date no research has addressed the reasons why these two Muslim scholars believed in religious pluralism and how they dealt with the issue. The present article is the first to provide a comparative study of the pluralistic views of ‘Ayn al-Qudāt and al-Nasafī through a philosophical approach.

## **B. Unity of Religions from ‘Ayn al-Qudāt’s Perspective**

‘Ayn al-Qudāt al-Hamadānī was a pioneering mystic who introduced the primary condition of gnosis (mystical knowledge) as the ability to see all religions and factions as equal, underscoring the importance of questioning inherited beliefs and breaking away from habits (Hamadānī 1994, 2:251-52).

Furthermore, ‘Ayn al-Qudāt recognizes heretics as true believers, asserting that heterodoxy may be in beliefs, characteristics and deeds. In his view, the beliefs of any believer in God, the prophets, Judgment Day, and religious knowledge are different from those of the prophet who brought that religion. Therefore, all religious people are heterodox in their beliefs (Hamadānī 1994, 2:204), while common people and even religious scholars mistakenly believe that only a few religions and schools are true, which implies that many of these religious and schools of thought are incorrect (Hamadānī 1994, 2:311).

‘Ayn al-Qudāt expresses confidence that most, if not all, religions and sects have a correct foundation, but over time, faulty narrators have led these streams astray (Hamadānī 1994, 2:297 and 330), with Islam being no exception, as he refers to the decline of Islam, citing Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, a mystic from the early Islamic centuries (Hamadānī 1994, 2:303).

In ‘Ayn al-Qudāt’s perspective, religion can be seen as having two aspects. Firstly, the right and undistorted aspect that is a common principle shared by all religions. Secondly, the distorted aspect by which religions are distinguished from each other. He highlights time and narrators as crucial factors contributing to distortion, asserting that it is the responsibility of God’s saints to identify the right aspect of a religion, which transcends time, and to communicate it to the faithful in a comprehensible way (Hamadānī 1994, 2:330).

## **C. Plurality of Religions from ‘Ayn al-Qudāt’s Perspective**

In view of the above account, ‘Ayn al-Qudāt has described the “wearing out” of religions as a departure from their true origins. However, one question remains unanswered: how have faulty narrators contributed to the divergence of religions and sects?

‘Ayn al-Qudāt believes differences in human understanding is due to differences in levels of their knowledge. This is a key principle that highlights the unity of religions in their fundamental principles and their distortion over time, which can be traced back to issues of human factor and language. As such, ‘Ayn al-Qudāt contends that linguistic errors are inevitable when messages are translated from one generation to another. In the following, we explore the role of language and translators, which are also associated with new hermeneutical subjects, in distorting religions.

## 1. The Role of Language in Diversity of Religions

The way humans encounter phenomena beyond the realm of their senses can either be intentional for the purpose of research and cognition, or it can occur unintentionally during an esoteric experience. Following such an experience, individuals may try to present an epistemological analysis of the subject using their powers of reasoning in order to make it comprehensible to others (Pournamdarian 2007, 59). This is where the role of language as a tool for expressing gnosis becomes apparent.

To fully grasp ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s perspective on the role of language in religious diversity, it is necessary to first examine his views on the difference between knowledge and gnosis. Like many other mystics, he acknowledges the distinction between the two concepts. However, unlike some of his peers, he asserts that gnosis is a specific kind of knowledge, which involves certainty and taste, complementing the acquired knowledge and going “beyond reason” (Hamadānī 1962, 28). On the other hand, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt has considered knowledge and gnosis not merely as two methodologies, but also as two different worlds of existence, which are related to his worldview. In his view, the world is composed of three realms: *Jabarūt* (the world of pure reason), *Malakūt* (the world of meaning and attributes), and *Mulk* (the material world). Human intellect originates from the world of *Jabarūt*; his heart has its roots in the world of *Malakūt*; and his brain has an origin in the world of *Mulk*. Given the different origins of these centers of cognition, their perceptions are different. In order to understand each other's perceptions, people need translations (Hamadānī 1997, 1:277).

## 2. Meaning Signified by Words

‘Ayn al-Quḍāt maintains that intellect transmits the divine gnosis, which has entered the heart, to the brain, which has a material origin (Hamadānī 2014, 142-43). One can therefore say that intellect is a tool that turns meaning into words to express the inexpressible. Therefore, in his opinion, words and meanings belong to the distinct realms of material and spiritual existences, as well as two different levels of rational epistemology and the realm beyond reason (Izutsu 1994, 105). In this context, another question arises: what is the connection between words and meanings in his view? In general, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt does not believe in the existence of a real connection between words and meanings. He maintains that signification of meaning by words is something idiomatic and not real. Each time a text is read, the meaning of its words may change and accordingly truth is not expressible through words (Hamadānī 2014, 295).

### 3. Polysemy

In addition to his discussion of the non-literal meaning of words, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt highlights the problem of polysemy (Hamadānī 2014, 407); that is, a sort of multidimensional structure of meaning based on a multidimensional use of words, not the existence of different meanings for a single word (Izutsu 1994, 115). Accordingly, he presents a threefold classification of words:

- A *homonym* is a word that refers to two different nouns, so that they have nothing in common but the spelling.
- A *portmanteau* is a word that signifies two nouns, which have a common meaning.
- An *analogous* word is one that signifies two different nouns, which only share the same concept (Hamadānī 1998, 2:257).

The latter (an analogous word) plays a prominent role in transmission of spiritual experiences or the language of expressing gnosis, since according to ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, a main difference between knowledge and gnosis lies in their expressibility and communicability. This means that in the case of knowledge, from each meaning, an interpretation corresponding to that meaning is conceived. However, as for gnosis, no meaning may be imagined except through analogous words (Hamadānī 1962, 67-68). In general, words are similar when they are not able to imply the concept incorporated in them. They have been made to express other meanings, and when they are heard, their apparent meaning is inferred first (‘Usayrān 2014, 109), and this similarity, as maintained by ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, means that a word could be applied in the realm of intellect and the realm beyond reason (Mirbagherifard and Niazi 2010, 273). Analogous words are consequently characteristics of a language for transmission of spiritual experiences, through which what is experienced in the realm beyond reason becomes expressible in the realm of intellect. However, in order to understand this meaning through analogous words, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt introduces the requirement of parity between the speaker and the listener in the position of *fanā*’ or annihilation, in which one is freed from the bondage of humanity reaching from *Mulk* to *Malakūt*. That is to say, he has transcended the words to reach the meaning (Hamadānī 2014, 309, 354).

### 4. The Role of Translators in Religious Diversity

‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s view of the role of the translator’s errors in diversity of religions, in addition to the topic of *analogous words*, could be linked to the issue of *ta’wīl*; that is, esoteric or symbolic interpretation. This is because, from his perspective, the experience of *fanā*’, or transcendence from *Mulk* to *Malakūt*, is necessary for understanding analogous words. Non-mystics have a way of understanding these truths, which is *ta’wīl*, and ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt defines it as access to truth and meanings of words through apparent meanings of words,

asserting that after reaching the experience of *fanā'* and observing the truth, one becomes free from *ta'wīl* (Hamadānī 1962, 67-68). On this definition, a question arises about the relationship between *ta'wīl* and analogous words.

As 'Ayn al-Qudāt categorizes certainty, *knowledge of certainty* is obtained in this world through the human intellect and his power of distinction, but *essence of certainty* is a level of spiritual experience in which the human discriminating power turns into a drunken excitement, and everything is observed through the heart (Hamadānī 1998, 1:354). Therefore, when the mystic achieves epistemic meanings through the heart and spiritual experience, he expresses them through analogous words. This can be considered equivalent to revelation of secrets. On the other hand, *ta'wīl* is to achieve such literal meanings through apparent meanings of words, which is a sort of secret revelation. Otherwise stated, analogous words are characteristics of the language of gnosis and the language of the speaker, but *ta'wīl* is a perception commensurate with the audience's understanding capacity, and a characteristic of gnosis interpretation (Fadavi 2021, 191). Consequently, there are two possible errors in communicating and interpreting the meanings, one of which is due to accurate narration, and the other to the audience's misunderstanding.

#### D. Unity of Religions from Nasafī's Perspective

'Azīz al-Dīn al-Nasafī is an open-minded and intellectually tolerant mystic (Zarrinkoob 2010, 160). These characteristics directly bear on the theory of unity of existence in Islamic mysticism. The very basis of this theory is the unity of the reality of existence in its essence, and the return of all pluralities to attributes and names of that single essence (Shamshiri and Mir 2017, 67).

According to al-Nasafī, "all beings are a single existence, and *Jabarūt*, *Malakūt*, and *Mulk* are the levels of this existence..." (Nasafī 2007a, 197). He introduces this single existence as a *light*, which is the soul of the universe, with its different manifestations demonstrating the attributes of this light. Al-Nasafī argues that various nations should not quarrel over their beliefs as God's existence is so magnificent and full of wisdom that no one can comprehend it as it is. If man transcends the world of plurality to the world of unity, he will find that the lover, the beloved, and love as well as the knower, the knowledge, and the known are a single being (Nasafī 2007a, 267-70). Accordingly, just as the universe has an appearance and an interior, which are united in essence and yet diverse and plural in appearance, religions also have two dimensions: an appearance and an interior, the shell of which is the body of beliefs and teachings that are relative in nature, but in the essence or core, they express facts that follow a fixed principle (Shamshiri and Mir 2018, 68).

Nasafī asserts that there is a unity before plurality, and a unity after plurality. In his view, plurality gives way to unity only when one comes to certainty that there is no one but God, and everything but Him is a manifestation and aspect

of the same light. All the while, Nasafi believes that sages only know the first unity and are negligent of the second unity (Nasafi 2007a, 106-214). For this reason, in describing polytheists and monotheists, al-Nasafi emphasizes the fact that the former is constantly in dispute with people protesting against others, while the latter, having gone beyond the manifestations and pluralities and reached the single essence of God, peacefully treats people in the world, not denying anyone, or accusing them of being misguided. Such a person has a compassionate view of other beings, not hesitating when anyone asks for help, because he has come to the gnosis that all human beings are on the path that leads to God (Nasafi 2007a , 107-293; Nasafi 1975, 216).

## **E. Plurality of Religions from al-Nasafi's Perspective**

In addition to his discussion of the unity of religions, al-Nasafi has also considered the plurality of religions, providing two important reasons why followers of religions and sects diverge, leading to religious plurality. This will be elaborated in what follows.

### **1. Plurality in Words and Unity in Meaning**

Al-Nasafi believes that God's existence is an infinite, unbounded light that encompasses all beings in the universe associated with every particle of the existence. In order to redeem polytheism and reach true monotheism, man must reach and observe this light. This raises the question why one, in the position of plurality, is not capable of grasping the truths of the world of unity. In response, al-Nasafi points out the concept of *veil of names* in the position of plurality to assert that it is the names and words that mask the paths, leading people to confusion and even polytheism. He describes these names and words as gatekeepers of the shrine of unity that keeps strangers away (Nasafi 2000, 147). Moreover, he refers to various hadiths that have caused disputes and confusions among people, stating that such disputes are caused by the words in hadiths and the Qur'an, since one tries to find meaning from the words, while he believes that words do not tell the truth with no way to the meaning. Even so, only those who, instead of reaching the meaning through the words, which lead people astray, shall make their way to the truth by coming from meanings to words, which is possible through acts of austerity and reflections on speeches of scholars as well as discovering the meanings and truths of things. For such a person, idiomatic words do not mask the path, but rather increase one's knowledge. Unlike those who move from words to meanings, such a person sees a single truth in dozens of forms within a plurality (Nasafi 2007b, 48-49).

On this account, al-Nasafi maintains that names are attributed entities that call one person "Hanafi," the other "Shafi'i," and others Christians, Jews, or Muslims (Nasafi 1975, 216), while all the disputes are results of ignorance, since beginners

did not notice that the sentence had one single meaning. Thus, the emergence of multiple religions was inevitable, and people wandered (Nasafi 2007a, 344):

From a thousand and one traits arose seventy-one sects,  
'Tis fine if one takes a hundred aspects for a single truth.

Therefore, if something is called by a hundred names, no plurality will arise in the reality of that thing (Nasafi 2007a, 380).

## 2. Belief in an Invented God

Among other reasons provided by al-Nasafi in accounting for the plurality of religions is the difference in people's or nations' perceptions and illusions. They think they know the truths of the world, the afterlife, and God, assuming that others are deprived of such knowledge (Nasafi 1975, 223). According to al-Nasafi, most people worship their own imaginary artificial god, which is the result of their personal illusion, which they refer to as God (Nasafi 2002, 79).

On his account, Gnostics have supposed that since these nations speak different languages, the beliefs held by all of these nations cannot be true, for the truth is but one and it is not in anyone's possession. Plurality in people's beliefs is caused by their reliance on personal opinions and thoughts, while all of them suffer from higher-order ignorance (that is, ignorance of ignorance) (Nasafi 2007a, 410). Each of these nations views the religion from its own perspective, which leads to the formation of a wide variety of beliefs in all times and religions (Nasafi 2000, 143). However, since no one knows the exact number of different religions and sects, the principles of these religions and sects cannot be determined, even though they all believe that because there is only one path of reason, such plurality is not tolerable in the principles as well (Nasafi 2007b, 11-23). Al-Nasafi tries to explain his view by giving the allegory of the elephant and the blind, which also appears in the Buddhist culture. After al-Nasafi, Rumi also cited the same allegory in a different way (Rumi 2012, 331-32).

In this parable, al-Nasafi relates the story of a man who enters a land where all people are blind. He tries to describe an elephant, which they have never seen before (Nasafi 2007b, 21-24).

At the end of this story, al-Nasafi asserts that such instructions would not provide people with knowledge of the elephant. They might even become more incapable of knowing the reality. Every human being describes God in a certain manner through what he hears, and accordingly different contradictory beliefs are formed. Then they proceed to write and interpret to prove their beliefs. However, if they fairly ponder the claim that different religions and sects are right, and put away prejudice, they become certain that such narrative and rational reasons cannot be true, since the narrative and rational reasons support only one belief, while each person's belief of each person has been formed for

a reason, and they are all followers. Therefore, follower is not allowed to accuse others of aberration and blasphemy, while all of them are equal in their ignorance (Nasafi 2007b, 24-26).

## F. Examination of Criteria for the Truth of Religions in ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt and Nasafi’s View

Over time, numerous perspectives on the plurality of religions and their claims to supremacy have emerged, prompting scholars to examine the criteria for determining the veracity of religious beliefs. These perspectives span different religious traditions and can sometimes be at odds with one another. The present research intends to measure the approaches of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt and al-Nasafi based on a single variable, which is the criterion of the veracity of religions in their views. To do so, we used a categorization by Glyn Richards concerning independent veracity criteria for the truth of religions, including salvation, rationality of religious beliefs, moral principles, and religious experiences (Richards 1989, 141, 177-79) to see the accuracy criterion posited by ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt and al-Nasafi, both of whom consider religious plurality and the correct and undistorted principle of religion.

According to ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, regarding the role of the intellect as a translator of divine messages through analogous words, and the role of translation errors and misunderstanding of the audience in deviation from these concepts, one can say that according to ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, there are no common or contradictory concepts in different religions. As al-Nasafi has referred to the plurality of words and names, this difference in various languages and idioms has masked the single meaning behind this plurality. Therefore, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt and al-Nasafi have explicitly acknowledged the accuracy of the tenets of religions. From their views, one can glean two criteria of veracity concerning these tenets and principles:

- *Spiritual experiences*: According to ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, the matter of certainty is what various religions agree upon: “This variety of religions that you see in the path leading to God is all arising from those who have not reached *knowledge of certainty*. How could there possibly be a dispute between men of vision?”
- *“Disputes between my people are graceful*: There are no disputes over the principles and tenets of a religion, except among the beginners, which is inevitable in the ancillaries of the religion” (Hamadānī 1998, 2:247).

In his opinion, the gnosis gained through intuition (spiritual experience) is bound to a divine reality. However, such gnostic concepts become diversified and grow more complex due to the passage of time, language, misunderstandings, and translation errors. On the other hand, although ‘Azīz al-Dīn al-Nasafi, just like ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, refers to an intuition at the level of *fanā*’ as a veracity criterion to identify the accuracy of religions, he does not believe in achieving the truth through words.

Moreover, al-Nasafi highlights to the validity of spiritual experiences. He reckons that since men of revelation and intuition have passed through all the veils to apprehend God directly, they have crossed the stage of knowledge of certainty and reached the essence of certainty. They are people of unity since they do not see and know anything and anyone but God, but see everyone and everything as God (Nasafi 2007a, 105). An experience in which one attains the meanings of the world of *Jabarūt* through the purity and innocence of one's heart may take place in the world of dreams or wakefulness for any perfect or imperfect human being, whether an infidel or a Muslim, regardless of his knowledge or ignorance. This is because here the condition for possessing the experience of unity is the simplicity and innocence of the heart. Even if one's heart does not enter the world of *Jabarūt*, it can become acquainted with the meanings of this world through celestial intellects and souls commensurate with its own capacity. It may transcend the stage of plurality, without goodwill being a condition for this experience. However, according to al-Nasafi, the benefit of such experiences is greater for the decent people (Nasafi 2007a, 209).

- *Collective wisdom*: 'Ayn al-Qudāt asserts that always along with wise men, there have been ignorant men who are overlooked by others, for in the previous ages, nonsense arguments and views could not find the opportunity to receive wide acceptance, let alone being capable of making a religion that would last for a millennium (Hamadānī 1998, 2:297). According to this view, when a thought or belief is accepted by the collective wisdom of a society, it indicates that there is a reality behind it (Yazdani 2013, 36). Otherwise, intellectuals and scholars of that society would not spend their lives writing and interpreting those thoughts (Hamadānī 1998, 2:324).

Al-Nasafi has also pointed out the role of collective wisdom in finding a common ground in religions. However, before this, he mentioned the role of individual wisdom in verifying various views. He believes that in a situation where one is faced with the plurality of religions and beliefs, he can deploy three different methods for verifying those religions:

1. A person with adequate talents and capabilities can do research and draw upon definite reasons and rational arguments to find the right religion without following others;
2. If a person lacks such talents and capabilities, he is wise enough to find a man of God and follow him;
3. He accepts that there is a path of salvation in whatever others have said as well (Nasafi 2007b, 27-29).

Therefore, in his view, if one cannot reach the truth through logic and rational reasoning, he can follow those who are more knowledgeable than him and those who possess intuitive experiences (i.e., saints of God). Otherwise, the most accurate argument is what the collective wisdom asserts. From what has been said, we can conclude that both scholars assert that it is possible to return

from words to meanings, or in other words, to reach the common principle of religions through levels of certainty. This means that, through the essence of certainty, i.e. intuition or spiritual experiences, one can apprehend the common meaning beneath different words under through guidance of the heart. Otherwise, he could try the path of knowledge of certainty, in which the intellect is the guide to certainty. Even though it is at a level lower than essence of certainty, one can examine and judge the rationality of religious beliefs through collective wisdom. However, on this matter there is a slight difference between the two mystics: while ‘Ayn al-Qudāt and al-Nasafī both mention the role of spiritual experiences, the rationality of religious beliefs, and transition from words to meanings, al-Nasafī underscores individual wisdom and the role of morality in achieving the unity of religions from plurality of religions.

### G. Conclusion

According to ‘Ayn al-Qudāt and ‘Azīz al-Dīn al-Nasafī, in order to understand the reason behind the plurality of religions, one must consider the existence of the two realms of appearance and the interior. Philosophically speaking, the former tries to explain the distinction based on his hermeneutic views by proposing concepts such as *meaning signified by words*, and *polysemy* to show that all religions have had a common, undistorted principle but then were trapped in plurality due to mistranslations as well as cognitive and linguistic errors. Al-Nasafī, however, has studied the matter in terms of the theory of the unity of existence akin to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s view that the plurality of religions goes back to linguistic and national differences. As a result, various nations have tried to find meaning through words, whereas words are not expressive of the truth. Consequently, the plurality that ‘Ayn al-Qudāt refers to as a human and linguistic fault is a natural transition from the point of unity to plurality in his opinion.

According to both mystics, emergence of plurality in different religions and sects is inevitable, as they are reflections of human diversity and forms of thought that ‘Ayn al-Qudāt and al-Nasafī take to be rooted in the process of rendering the spiritual experiences understandable and expressible, just like the way experiential roots associated with the divine reality are highlighted in modern discussions of religious pluralism. However, ‘Ayn al-Qudāt and al-Nasafī have neglected the diversity and differences in these experiences, which is something pluralists view as man’s confrontation with the divine reality in various forms of religious experience.

Eventually, it can be concluded that despite the relatively different approaches adopted by ‘Ayn al-Qudāt and al-Nasafī, they both have reached the same conclusions. Neither has an exclusivist view of religion. To the contrary, they have addressed the plurality of religions with the purpose of dissuading others from having an exclusivist view of their beliefs. On the other hand, their

approach cannot be seen as inclusivist either, since they believe that it is necessary for everyone to choose the closest way to the truth through the criteria for the veracity of religions. Thus, can one say that they had a pluralistic approach to the issue of religious plurality? To answer this question, two points must be taken into account, which are emphasized by both mystics: one is the presence of a common principle in different religions, and the other is the distortion and deviation of various religions from that common principle.

According to 'Ayn al-Quḍāt, all religions wear out, and over time, they become susceptible to increasing deviation due to their narrators and linguistic errors. Having a similar view on the issue, al-Nasafī illustrates it through the allegory of the blind and the elephant, which is also deployed by John Harwood Hick (1922-2012) in establishing his theory of the existence of multiple truths, concluding that since each of those blind people pointed to an aspect of the entire reality, then no one was wrong (Pojman and Rea 2014, 641). However, al-Nasafī has drawn an exactly opposite conclusion from this allegory, since none of the blind people in this story could find a path to the truth.

Therefore, one can conclude that according to both mystics, religious beliefs of individuals not only fail to help them approach the truth, but also lead them astray, as they may turn away from the truth that has been the common principle of all religions. In addition, they both point to the role of the men of God—that is, those with the ability to see—in returning to this common principle. In this regard, 'Ayn al-Quḍāt seems more optimist than al-Nasafī by proposing the theory of analogous words.

## References

- 'Usayrān, 'Afīf. 2014. *An Introduction to 'Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadānī's Tamhīdāt*. Tehran: Asatir.
- Abbasi, Valiyollah. 2008. "Approaches to the plurality of religions." *Research quarterly of new religious thought*, no. 6-7: 115-58. [<http://andishe.maaref.ac.ir/article-1-1799-fa.html>].
- Basinger, David. 2020. "Religious Diversity (Pluralism)." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020 Edition). Edited by Edward N. Zalta. URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/religious-pluralism/>.
- Fadavi, Saba. 2021. *'Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadānī*. Tehran: Negah Moaser.
- Hamadānī, 'Ayn al-Quḍāt, al-. 1962. *Shakwā al-gharīb 'an al-awṭān ilā 'ulamā' al-bildān*. Edited by 'Afīf 'Usayran. Paris: Dar Byblion.
- Hamadānī, 'Ayn al-Quḍāt, al-. 1994. *Maktūbāt*. Edited by Alinaghi Monzavi and 'Afīf 'Usayrān. Tehran: Manuchehri.
- Hamadānī, 'Ayn al-Quḍāt, al-. 2014 *Tamhīdāt*. Edited by 'Afīf 'Usayrān. Tehran: Manuchehri.
- Hosseini, Seyyedeh Zahra. 2019. "Matter of beliefs: an examination of Ibn al-'Arabī's Stances toward the diversity of religions." *Philosophy of Religion*, no. 3: 655-75.

- Izutsu, Toshihiko. 1994. *Creation and the Timeless Order of Things*. Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press.
- Mashidi, Jalil and Samaneh Farzaneh. 2012. "The study of religious pluralism in Rumi's *Masnavi*". *Ayeneh Ma'refat*, 12, no. 1: 83-107.
- Mirbagherifard, Seyyed Ali Asghar and Shahrzad Niazi. 2010. "An analysis of the mystical language in 'Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī." *Philosophical-theological research*, 12, no. 1-2: 267-86. [[http://pfk.qom.ac.ir/article\\_147.html?lang=en](http://pfk.qom.ac.ir/article_147.html?lang=en)].
- Rūmī, Jalāl al-Dīn Moḥammad Ibn Moḥammad. 2012. *Masnavi Ma'navi*. Edited by Richard Nicholson. Tehran: Adineh Sabz.
- Nasafi, 'Azīz al-Dīn, al-. 1975. *Mqṣad aqṣā*. Edited by Hamed Rabbani. Tehran: Ganjineh.
- Nasafi, 'Azīz al-Dīn, al-. 2000. *Bayān al-tanzīl*. Edited by Seyyed Ali Asghar Mirbagherifard. Tehran: Elmi Farhangi Publishing Co.
- Nasafi, 'Azīz al-Dīn, al-. 2007a. *Al-Insān al-kāmīl*. Edited by Marijan Mole. Tehran: Tahouri.
- Nasafi, 'Azīz al-Dīn, al-. 2007b. *Kashf al-ḥaqā'iq*. Edited by Ahmad Mahdavi Damghani. Tehran: Elmi Farhangi Publishing Co.
- Nasafi, 'Azīz al-Dīn, al-. 2002. *Zubdat al-ḥaqā'iq*. Edited by Haghverdi Nasseri. Tehran: Tahouri.
- Pojman, Louis and Michael Rea. 2014. *Philosophy of Religion (An Anthology)*. Boston MA: Cengage Learning.
- Pournamdarian, Taghi. 2007. *Mysteries and mysterious stories in Persian literature*. Tehran: Elmi Farhangi Publishing Co.
- Richards, Glyn. 1989. *Towards a Theology of Religions*. London: Routledge.
- Runzo, Joseph. 1988. "God, Commitment, and Other Faiths: Pluralism vs. Relativism." *Faith and Philosophy*, 5, no. 4: 343-64.
- Shamshiri, Babak and Mohammad Mir. 2017. "Study of the peace-oriented religious education based on mystical religious pluralism." *Religions and mysticism*, 50, no. 1: 147-70. [<http://erfanmag.ir/article-1-856-fa.html>].
- Shamshiri, Babak and Mohammad Mir. 2018. "The study of religious pluralism from a mystical perspective and its implications in religious training." *Pajūhishnamih 'irfān*, no. 19: 64-88.
- Yazdani, Najaf. 2013. "Proximity view of 'Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadānī through various schools." *Motaleat-e taghribi mazaheb-e eslami*, 9, no. 34: 30-46. [[http://foroughevahdat.mazaheb.ac.ir/article\\_7334.html?lang=en](http://foroughevahdat.mazaheb.ac.ir/article_7334.html?lang=en)]
- Zargaran, Iman and Qulamhossein Qulamhosseinzadeh. 2016. "Religious pluralism in 'Azīz al-Dīn al-Nasafi's book *The perfect man*." *Mysticism studies*, no. 24: 105-30.
- Zarrinkoob, Abdolhossein. 2010. *A trail of seeking Sufism in Iran*. Tehran: Amirkabir Publishing Co.

