

Exploring Human Interiority*

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The term ‘mystic’ with its derivatives has been widely banalised in the contemporary mass culture imposed by global consumerism. Most of the time it has been reduced to meaning what is most extravagant, illogical and banal. In reality, the term, as is known, derives from the Greek *myô*, which means to keep silent, above all about the secrets of religious mysteries.¹ Subsequently, it was used in religious language to refer to the deepest reality of the human being, to what is most real in the depths of the human heart, where man meets the Absolute. To take this fundamental dimension of the human being seriously, to want to verify it in one’s daily life, and to wager one’s own life upon it – this means to enter the mystic dimension. It appears first and foremost as a highly dramatic experience: man, indeed, is that being who

¹See ‘Introduzione alla mistica: unità di esclusione o unità di unione’, in Giuseppe Scattolin, *Spiritualità nell’islam* (EMI, Bologna, 2004), pp. 11–30. An interesting reflection on mysticism as experience of life is that of Raimon Panikkar, *L’esperienza della vita – La mistica* (Jaca Book, Milan, 2005; original Spanish edition 2004).

is searching for the most profound and real of his existence, that is to say what is most indispensable and necessary for him there, and yet he can only reach this goal or fulfil this task as an absolute gift and pure grace. The mystic experience, secondly, leads us to a level that is beyond any clear logical-rational formulation. The mystic experience, in fact, seeks to be, and must be, a concrete experience of absolute Reality and not an abstract discourse about It. It is thus evident that the mystical, the heart of the religious experience, has to become the privileged place of inter-religious dialogue and the basis for a more serious intercultural dialogue. Inter-religious dialogue that does not achieve communication at the level of spiritual experience is a dialogue that is still incomplete, and maimed.²

After establishing these premises, I now wish to enter fields in which is possible, and I would say incumbent, an encounter between the various mystic

²An example of comparative reflection between the two mysticisms is Arnaldez Roger, *Réflexions chrétiennes sur la mystique musulmane* (OEIL, Paris, 1989).

experiences, and those of Christianity and Islam in particular. I call these fields spaces or places of encounter because they refer to questions and issues shared by all mystic experiences and to which these are called to respond. Reading one's own mystic experience in dialogue and exchange with other similar experiences is not only useful, it is also necessary and indeed indispensable, in the times in which we live. This is well demonstrated by certain individuals of dialogue, such as the Sufi and Muslim scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths, or the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh.³

1. A mystic anthropology. Every mystic experience in Christianity, in Islam and in the other religions appears first and foremost as an experience of the human 'self', that is to say of that which is most true and profound in the human being. Mystics have always been great explorers of human interiority. They

³See by way of example Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufism* (Rusconi, Milan, 1994); Bede Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality – Western Science, Eastern Mysticism and Christian Faith* (Fount, London, 1992; first published in 1989).

are the first to state that a human being is not simply a thing amongst other things and cannot be reduced to the sum of his physio-bio-psychological components. The human being has a profundity from which springs his true identity, depths commonly referred to with the term 'soul' (*psyché, nafs*). When probing the depths of the human soul, mystics are witnesses to the fact that this is mysteriously but really linked to its primary source — the Absolute, the unlimited, the not understandable and the not graspable but always present Horizon of every human activity, above all in fundamental acts of knowledge, freedom and love. It is precisely the loss of this spiritual dimension which has brought about the deep crisis that is now being experienced by modern man. Indeed, notwithstanding great technical-scientific advance, modern man seems to have lost the meaning of his own existence, of his true human identity. Modern man, as has been observed above, finds himself in a state of disruption, an unstoppable fall into an empty externalism that is increasingly mechanised and robotic, and which I would like to sum up in the statement:

‘man created the machine and he has been transformed into its image and likeness’. The retrieving for human beings of their ‘being-for-transcendence’ dimension, as *homo viator*, that is to say as a being on a journey directed towards, and open to, encounter with the Absolute, remains one of the fundamental tasks of religions in general and of mystic pathways in particular. The Sufis, the Muslim mystics, left behind them pages of interesting and profound reflections on the real ‘vocation’ of man, as a being directed by essence to God. At the centre of their thought, in fact, is a famous hadith, a saying attributed to Mohammed, the Prophet of Islam, which states: ‘he who knows himself (literally his soul, *nafs*), knows his Lord’.⁴ In the Islamic vision, a human being is defined by three fundamental categories: he is the servant (*‘abd*), the vicar or lieutenant (*khalīfa*),

⁴Thich Nhat Hanh, *La luce del Dharma. Dialogo tra Cristianesimo e Buddismo* (Oscar Mondadori, Milan, 2003; first published 1999).

and the image of God (*ṣūra*).⁵ A human being is first and foremost ‘the servant of God’ (*‘abd Allāh*), he is, that is to say, totally in a relationship with God, in an absolute ontological dependence on Him. The definition of servant (*‘abd*) does not lower a human being, as a superficial reading would lead one to believe: it is, instead, the source and reason for his nobility. In totally and consciously actuating this absolute dependence on God, the servant-man (*‘abd*) encounters a Lord who honours him, making him a participant in His lordship over creatures, because of which man is called to be the ‘vicar’ or the lieutenant (*khalīfa*) of God over the creation. All of this, however, is based upon another fundamental ontological reality — man is created in the ‘image’ (*ṣūra*) of God.⁶ He, therefore, can, and must, reproduce in himself

⁵This hadith, commonly mentioned in the Sufi tradition, is not to be found in the canonic collections, see A. J. Wensinck, *Concordance et Indices de la Tradition Musulmane* (E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1936–1969), 7 vols.

⁶For a more complete analysis of this subject see ‘L’uomo nell’Islam’, in Giuseppe Scattolin, *Dio e uomo nell’Islam* (EMI, Bologna, 2004), pp. 36–68.

the traits (*kbulūq*) of God: ‘clothe yourselves in the traits of God’ is also an important hadith and one which has become one of the basic points in the Sufi pathway.⁷ All of this, lastly, flowed into many Sufi currents, into that of Ibn ‘Arabī in particular, in the elaboration of the idea of the perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), in which the human being is seen as a microcosm, a mirror of divine qualities, and a summary of the manifestations of the Absolute-Real (*ḥaqq*) in the universe (*khalq*). A human being, therefore, is called, according to this Sufi vision, to realise his being as a complete manifestation of the Absolute-Real in a profound union of the creating-creature Real (*ḥaqq-khalq*) and the servant-Lord: he becomes in the end the lordly-servant (*‘abd rabbānī*), that is to say a servant invested with the qualities of his Lord.

These speculations of the Sufis recall similar themes of Christian mysticism. In the Christian vision as well the human being is the image-servant

⁷This hadith is canonical, that is to say it is recognised as being authentic by Islamic tradition, see Wensinck, *Concordance*, III p. 438b.

of God who is entrusted with looking after His creation. In the same way, the speculations of the Sufis on the idea of the perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*) can be put in parallel with those of Christian mystics on the 'divinisation' (*theopoiêsis-theiôsis*) of the human being, taking well into account all the differences that come from the different visions of faith. In the Christian vision, in fact, one is not dealing only with a participation in the qualities of God but also with a participation in the life itself of God in its intimate and eternal source —the Communion of the Trinity. A deep exchange between these visions and experiences should, anyway, be illuminating for both these mystical traditions.

2. The human being and his environment: the universe. A human being is located in a universe that extends and broadens to increasingly mysterious dimensions. And yet it is specifically in that universe, and through it, that he is called to his self-realisation, that is to say to engage in his journey towards the Absolute. This point, too, could become a broad and

fertile field of exchange and dialogue between these two mystic traditions. Both these traditions, in fact, state that the universe cannot be reduced to a 'mere matter' that can be manipulated to man's pleasure: the universe, instead, is in its deepest and truest sense the space of the pathway of man towards the Absolute. A contemporary Sufi master, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, affirms that the universe in the Sufi vision has two dimensions or two fundamental aspects: one that is changing and one that is permanent. Forgetting the aspect of permanence and concentrating only on the aspect of mutability and empirical experience has been, in the view of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the great error of modern science. This fact has led to a secularised vision of the universe, to the loss of its sacred dimension, and consequently, also, to the loss of the sacred dimension of the human being, who is located in it. Indeed, notwithstanding the enormous scientific progress that he has achieved, man seems to have completely lost the meaning of his existence. After reducing the universe to a mere 'object to be used and consumed', as matter that can be manip-

ulated as he pleases, the human being has ended up by reducing himself, as well, to a mere 'object to be used and consumed', prey to the consumerist technology that he has created. As a result, there has been a total fall of values with an exasperated concentration on the material and utilitarian aspects alone of nature, which has led in the end to an unchecked exploitation of its resources. For this reason, it is necessary to return to what Hossein Nasr calls the 'qualitative science' of the great religious traditions, which, indeed, have always read the universe as relative changing being which is of necessity in a relationship with the permanent absolute Being who supports it. Indeed, the profound meaning of the relative-contingent is that of being a manifestation of the Necessary-Absolute.

3. The human being and his ultimate foundation: God. In the end, however, the human being finds his deepest and truest identity when he is in a relationship with his first Origin and his ultimate End, that is to say with the Absolute. Here the dialogue

between the various religions reaches its apex because it is specifically in the taking of a stance before the Absolute that every religion reveals its most characteristic originality but also surprising matches with other religions. Indeed, every religion is inspired by the same first Origin and is directed towards the same ultimate End, that is to say God.

Being for the Absolute. The Absolute cannot be a product of man himself; He would be an idol and this is a profound and radical deception as regards human identity itself. The Absolute always remains sovereignly free of His own accord: He communicates Himself as He wishes and where He wishes without any previous condition being imposed on Him by anybody. This is the heart of every mystic experience and a point on which one can find convergences and interesting consonances between the various mystic traditions, and the Abrahamic in particular. The apology of the Persian Sufi (627/1230), in his book *The Word of Birds*, is well known. When the thirty birds (the symbol of Sufis searching for

God) reach the gates of the palace of Sīmūrgh, the mysterious bird of China (the symbol of the divine Being, the ultimate end of the search), in answer to their request to meet Him they hear that although they need to meet Him, He does not need them. God always remains the Self-sufficient One (*ghani*), totally independent of His creatures and their requests. But here a fundamental question is raised. Does this Absolute of necessity have to remain only a far away horizon, an asymptotic goal towards which man projects his existence without receiving any answer? Can He not make Himself present in history and reveal Himself explicitly to the human pilgrim? And who can place prior conditions on the being and acting of the Absolute? The Absolute is always free to dispose of Himself without conditions. The pathway towards Him, if it wants to be an authentic search for Him, can only be carried out in a humble waiting for His possible advent in human history. The unending human waiting can be seen as the only pre-supposition that He has placed in the human heart so that He can reveal Himself and give Himself to man, to use

a famous phrase of St. Augustine: 'You made us for You [O Lord] and our hearts are unsettled until they rest in You' (*Confessions* 1, 1). The shared experience of all the mystics of all religious traditions bears witness to the fact that a total emptying is required of the human being before the Absolute in order to be filled with Him alone. The Sufis spoke at length about *fanā'* (the annihilation, the emptying of oneself) in order to achieve *baqā'* (subsisting in God), terms that invoke the 'everything and nothing' of so much of the Christian mystic tradition (see the *todo y nada* of Spanish mysticism). But when the Absolute irrupts into human history, this last takes on new meanings and dimensions. The signs, although taken from the created world, reveal themselves to be full of never thought of meanings, horizons that transcend the limits of the creation. The true mystic, whatever religious tradition he or she belongs to, is a person who has lived in the most radical way this encounter with the Absolute, and, like Moses on Mount Sinai, has been transfigured by it.

'The greatest and the nearest'. The Absolute,

therefore, is experienced by mystics at one and the same time in His transcendence and His immanence, in His unity and in His multiplicity, and in His simplicity and His variety. None of these aspects can be isolated and denied because the Absolute as such can only be the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the synthesis of opposites, or, as I prefer to say, He is the *transcendentia oppositorum*, the overcoming of opposites, beyond the limited and limiting distinctions raised by measuring and calculating human reason (*'aql*). This is what the mystics of all religions never tire of repeating. Indeed, the Absolute is always the Mystery that is understood as much as He is not understood because 'if you understand Him, he is not God' (St. Augustine). This is akin to a famous saying attributed to Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq (m. 12/634), the companion of the Prophet of Islam and his first successor (caliph): 'Praise be to He who gave to His creatures as ways of knowing him only that of their inability to know him'.⁸

⁸This hadith, which is often mentioned by the Sufi tradition, is also not to be found in the canonical collections: see the comments

In Islamic thought in particular the question of the proclamation of the unity of God (*tawḥīd*) together with the reality of His various attributes troubled for a long time the thought of theologians without them coming to a clear solution: they referred people in the end to the silence of 'do not ask how' (*bilā kayfa*). I believe that only in the Sufis did this problem receive a more real approach because they were not afraid to enter the 'paradoxes of the One'. The Sufi of Andalusia, Ibn 'Arabī, for example, did not see the summit of the proclamation of the unity of God (*tawḥīd*) in the affirmation of an abstract divine unity, as understood by most believers and Muslim theologians. The true *tawḥīd* for him, indeed, lay in the paradoxical affirmation of divine unity in the multiplicity of His self-manifestations (*tajalliyyāt*). These self-manifestations are real aspects of the Absolute-Real (*ḥaqq*) who is always and at one and the same time One and multiple, Creator and creature, according to the points of view adop-

on it made by al-Ghazālī, in *Esperienze mistiche* III, pp. 241–242.

ted. The Absolute-Real (*ḥaqq*), in addition, must not be seen as being in a state of immobile stasis but, rather, as being in an inexhaustible dynamism of being, moved by a mysterious original, transcendent and creative force—Love (*ḥubb*).⁹

In a famous passage from *Pearls of Wisdom*, Ibn ‘Arabī proclaims: ‘the movement that is the existence of the world was a movement of love... Without such love the world would not have come into existence; therefore the movement from nothing to existence is the movement of the Creator towards it (existence)... It is thus proved that the movement was a movement of love and that therefore there is no movement in the universe unless it is in a relationship with love’.¹⁰

⁹See the text and commentary in *Esperienze mistiche nell’Islam*, vol. II, 1996, p. 189.

¹⁰This hadith states: ‘I was an unknown treasure and I wanted to be known, thus I created the world and through it they (the creatures) knew me. This hadith as well, commonly quoted in the Sufi tradition, is not to be found in the canonical collections. The text quoted here is translated from the Arab text in Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, Abū ‘Alā ‘Afifī (ed.) (Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, Beirut, 1980), pp. 203–204; cf. also Arthur John Arberry, *Sufism*.

These references are sufficient to demonstrate that here as well there is ample space for shared reflections that could bring out extraordinary parallelisms, which perhaps have never been thought of, between the various experiences of mysticism and in particular those of the three Abrahamic religions.



The transcendent and trans-descendant Mystery. It is here that in my view one could find a point of understanding on a question which for centuries has divided and opposed Christians and Muslims, with reciprocal polemics and condemnations, and not only of a theoretical kind. I mean the clash between Islamic monotheism and the Christian Trinity. These are dogmas that in the theological controversies of the past were seen for the most part as being irreconcilable positions which were mutually exclusive and mutually denying. I do not intend here, evidently enough, to eliminate the differences that exist

An Account of the Mystics of Islam, reprinted (Allen & Unwin, London, 1990; first edition 1950), p. 28.

between these two religious traditions in a compromise that would in basic terms be a betrayal of both faiths. This is a matter, instead, of understanding questions and issues that are from many points of view similar and exist in both these religious visions and which could help us to open up to greater mutual understanding, thereby overcoming atavistic prejudices.

The basic problem that presents itself to both these traditions can be expressed in the above-mentioned terms: must God, the ultimate mystery to which the human being is directed, remain of necessity closed up in His transcendence as a prisoner of a limit that He Himself cannot cross? Or, rather, is He free to give not only things and qualities (something conceded by Sufism and by other mystic traditions) but also to give 'Himself' to His creatures, overcoming the supposed limit of transcendence? The Christian faith has expressed itself in the positive in answering this question, basing itself on the revelation of God Himself that He is absolute and unconditional love: 'God is love' [1]n

4, 8 and 16]. In this vision, being-God does not mean first and foremost His isolation in a transcendent and absolute unity, which cannot be approached by His creatures. Being-God means, instead, first of all His transcendent capacity to communicate Himself, specifically Himself, outside Himself, in a free self-communication but one that is also total. The Christian faith sees in the creation a first self-communication of God that is called 'external'. But this external self-communication of God has its root and its source in the internal self-communication of God from Himself to Himself. God, in fact, is by essence Communion, being in Himself eternal Love, eternally Loving and Loved; this is the floor, or the abyss, of the mystery of the Trinity, which is and remains a Mystery of love. And it is specifically for this reason that He creates. Specifically for this reason He is and remains free and able to communicate not only things and qualities but also Himself, specifically Himself, outside Himself, to His creatures who remain always free to accept or otherwise this divine self-communication. In the Christian vision this is

the first and last root of the 'divinisation' (*theopoiêsis-theiôsis*) of the human being that the Fathers of the Church expressed in the famous *theologoumenon*: 'God became man so that man could become God'. I referred above to how this question finds interesting parallels in the burning speculations of many Sufis about the idea of the perfect Man (*al-insân al-kâmil*). Here, obviously enough, there is not sufficient space for further considerations on this subject but it is sufficient to have alluded to interesting parallels between these two worlds. Whatever the case, it should be clear that the problem of the unity and the multiplicity of God lies well beyond the simplistic mathematical formula of the one and the three, as it has been commonly understood by believers and established by Islamic traditional polemic. In fact, the paradoxical aspect of the unity of God was in some ways also perceived by the deepest and most daring insights of Sufis who went well beyond the abstract rational-theological categories of theologians. Indeed, many Sufis have intuited that the abyss of the divine Being is moved by an unfathomable Mys-

tery of essential mercy (*raḥma dḥātiyya*) and original love (*maḥabba aṣliyya*): this is the first impulse that moved the ‘hidden treasure’, that is the say the divine Essence, to expand into an infinite series of self-manifestations that begins from Itself and returns to Itself.¹¹



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¹¹Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, Abū ‘Alā ‘Afifī (ed.) (Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, Beirut, 1980), pp. 203–204.