

An Introduction to Islamic Mysticism

2.1 Definition of Islamic Mysticism

The word Irfan, translated as mysticism, comes from the Arabic root (ma-ri-fah), which means to have a clear and deep understanding. It is this manner that Islamic Mysticism is known as Irfan, as it includes a type of clear and deep understanding of God and the reality of the cosmos. And it is attributed to Islam because such an understanding is formed within an Islamic framework. However, it must be mentioned that Islamic Mysticism is not confined to just knowledge and understanding.

2.2. The Dimensions of Islamic Mysticism

Islamic Mysticism is divided into two main components: theoretical mysticism and practical mysticism.

What is meant by theoretical mysticism is the collection of that clear and deep knowledge and understanding concerning God, His Names and Attributes, whereas what is meant by practical mysticism are the practical steps and acts that are based upon the above understanding of God. The understanding of God and His manifestations that form theoretical mysticism are founded on the mystical unveilings of the mystics, and it is when these unveilings are presented and organized in the form of statements that relate to the understanding of God, His Names, Attributes and manifestations that the Science of Theoretical Islamic Mysticism is shaped.

The practical dimension of Islamic Mysticism deals with the stations and states that an engrossed traveler must pass during his spiritual wayfaring towards true felicity. The knowledge and understanding of these stations and the means of passing through them is what forms the Science of Practical Islamic Mysticism.

2.3 The Subject of Islamic Mysticism

In acknowledging the two dimensions of Islamic Mysticism, it must therefore be said that the subject of theoretical mysticism is God, His Names and Attributes, and that of practical mysticism is spiritual wayfaring towards the Truth.

2.4 The Method of Islamic Mysticism

The method applied in theoretical mysticism is mystical unveilings supported by intellectual thought, while in practical mysticism the method applied is spiritual self-exercise and purification of the soul.

2.5 The Origin of Islamic Mysticism

This discussion is fundamental for those who wish to get better acquainted with Islamic Mysticism.

2.5.1 The Origins of Mysticism within the Religious Texts

There is no doubt that Islam is known as being one of the main monotheistic religions and that the belief in the oneness of God is one of its core beliefs. In addition, great emphasis is also made within the Glorious Quran and Prophetic traditions on the necessity of detachment from the material world. Hence, Islamic Mysticism contains teachings whose origins can be sourced within the Glorious Quran and Prophetic traditions. However, it cannot be denied that some self-proclaimed pseudo 'Islamic mystics' performed some practices that go against Islamic teachings, such as severe monasticism. And it was these practices that opened the door for criticism and condemnation of the mystical trends within the Islamic tradition.

2.5.2 The Foundational Nature of Islamic Mysticism

It must be noted that the efforts of some to find the origin of Islamic Mysticism in a tradition outside of the Islamic tradition, such as Hinduism for example, are unfitting, for many of the teachings of true Islamic Mysticism can be found emphasized within the Islamic tradition. In addition, the miraculous nature of the Glorious Quran and the inability of other traditions to influence divine revelation oppose the idea of Islamic Mysticism coming into Islam from an external source. Further, the association of many of the mystical orders to religious personalities is another indicator of the internal origin of Islamic Mysticism.

2.6 The Relationship between Islamic Mysticism and the Other Islamic Disciplines

After its formation, Islamic Mysticism distinguished itself from the other Islamic Disciplines such as philosophy, theology and ethics. What follows is a brief explanation of these differences.

2.6.1 The Relationship between Islamic Mysticism and Islamic Philosophy

Even though both theoretical mysticism and philosophy seek recourse with the intellectual, the goal of theoretical mysticism is the explaining and elucidation of mystical unveilings and illuminations, whereas the goal of philosophy is to intellectually explain and explore the general laws of existence. Further, theoretical mysticism centers its discussions on the unicity of existence, while philosophy focusses on the divisions of existence, such as unity and multiplicity, necessary and contingent, cause and effect, etc.

2.6.2 The Relationship between Islamic Mysticism and Islamic Theology

Theoretical mysticism is also different from Islamic Theology. In the Science of Theoretical Mysticism, mystical unveilings and intellection are the methods used to better understand God, His Names and Attributes, whereas in Islamic Theology numerous methods, including intellection, textual proofs and debate, are used in order to defend the beliefs and tenets of religion.

2.6.3 The Relationship between Islamic Mysticism and Islamic Ethics

Both Theoretical Mysticism and Islamic Ethics aim to take steps to better understand true felicity and salvation. However, the difference being that theoretical mysticism aims to do so by means of mystical unveilings and illumination, whereas Islamic Ethics aims to do so by means of understanding the traits and faculties of the soul and the method and way to attain moral and ethical virtues.

2.6.4 The Relationship between Islamic Mysticism and Quranic Exegesis

The Glorious Quran is the most important source for Islamic thought. Its teachings are said to be like a guiding lamp for many of the teachings of the mystics. In addition, the verses not only contain deep and profound intellectual knowledge, but also on occasion showed the path towards spiritual wayfaring. Similarly, many true mystics, by means of their mystical unveilings and illuminations, were able to acquire a deeper and more profound meaning of the verses of the Glorious Quran. These understandings then became the basis for the formation of a mystical exegesis and interpretation of the Glorious Quran.

2.7. The further Enrichment of Islam via Islamic Mysticism

The already rich Islamic tradition was further enriched by Islamic Mysticism. These new inroads were made in both the theoretical and practical dimensions.

2.7.1 The Inroads of Theoretical Islamic Mysticism

That which was known as Islamic Mysticism, gradually turned into a core academic discipline. This discipline then came into contact with other academic disciplines such as philosophy, theology, ethics and Quranic exegeses, which in turn resulted in academic exchanges occurring between. These exchanges not only prevented Islamic Mysticism from falling to the way side, but also resulted in the cementing and the spread of this trend. As an example, many believe that the philosophical school of Transcendental Wisdom came about because of the acquaintance of the philosophers with the school of theoretical mysticism.

2.7.2 The Inroads of Practical Islamic Mysticism

In addition to the above, there were many scholars who appeared within Islamic history that assisted with the spread of Islamic Mysticism. Also, many groups and societies, who had inclinations towards Islamic Mysticism, appeared whose objectives were to spread justice and equity within the Islamic society and to assist the destitute. The Futuwat movement can be mentioned as an example of this. This movement, throughout the history of Islam, tied itself to the fabric of society, and even at times went further than the individual level of interaction and entered the arena of creating social systems and order. For example, this movement established principles that were appropriate for all types of work and occupations, and tried to shape the individual behavior of people to fall within a particular framework, for instance, individuals who had occupations would take an oath that they would be truthful in their particular skill, that they would help the needy and disadvantaged and stand up against oppression.

2.8 The Current State of Islamic Mysticism

In this section the current state of Islamic Mysticism will be discussed.

2.8.1 Theoretical Mysticism

The sixth century AH can be considered to be the peak for theoretical mysticism, as it was this era that saw the rise of Ibn Arabi and his efforts to try and present the discussions of theoretical mysticism in a clear and understandable manner. It can therefore be claimed that the majority of mystics who followed from him were mainly concerned with explaining and expounding his thought, as very few inventive and original ideas can be seen in the writings that came after him. Today, with the advent and advancement of new research tools, the ground is prepared for greater reflection to be done on the texts of Islamic Mysticism. A large number of these new developments have occurred in the re-examination and re-research of the texts. In addition to this increase in research, the study of theoretical mysticism has also found official recognition within specialized educational centers, universities and seminaries. These studies range from bachelors all the way to PhD level. This has resulted in the training and developing of many students who have become aware of Islamic Mysticism by way of its primary and source texts.

2.8.2 Practical Mysticism

The third and fourth century AH are considered to be the peak eras for Practical Mysticism. This era saw the appearance of many great mystics whose practical advices and spiritual treatises have continued to show the path for those seeking the path of practical mysticism. After this golden era, we witness a decline in the development of practical mysticism. In this way, the progress that occurred within practical mysticism was far less than when compared to the progress and advancement seen in theoretical mysticism. One of the possible reasons for this decrease in practical mysticism may be the complex nature of the facets of contemporary life, attachment to the material world and the dominance of consumerism within it. These factors close the doors towards spiritual wayfaring and spiritual self-sacrifice. Nevertheless, regardless of this present state, there are still individuals who choose this path and make efforts to enter the arena of practical mysticism by means of religious spiritual self-sacrifice.