CHAPTER 19

“Religions, Opinions and Beliefs are Nothing but Roads and Paths . . . While the Goal is One”: Between Unity and Diversity in Islamic Mysticism

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1 Introduction

A liberal and tolerant attitude towards other religions and spiritual paths is characteristic of many mystical traditions worldwide. The notion, shared by different mystical teachings, of a unity inextricably connecting God, the world and mankind, often lends itself to a universal approach whereby religious and social differences between fellow men are perceived as being essentially inconsequential. This approach is likewise evident in various Islamic mystical writings, where one may detect a more tolerant attitude towards the ‘other’ than that expressed in many Islamic theological and legal works. An example of such an attitude is found in the famous “Epistle” (al-Risāla) of the great Ṣūfī author Abū l-Qāsim ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī (b. 376/986; d. 465/1072). In a discussion concerning divine mercy and compassion, al-Qushayrī relates the story of a Zoroastrian (majūsī) who sought the hospitality of Abraham the patriarch, God’s friend (al-khalīl). Abraham, however, was unwilling to offer him hospitality unless he submitted himself to God. Allāh then revealed himself to Abraham saying,

Oh Abraham! You [were] not [willing to] feed him unless he changed his religion; yet We have been feeding him for the last seventy years despite his unbelief (ʿalā kufrihi). If you were to offer him hospitality for just one night, what would be held against you?

Note that the terms “tolerant”, “liberal” and “pluralistic” in this article are used in a restricted and relative sense, appropriate to medieval thought and society. These terms should not be understood in their modern or post-modern contexts. For a useful discussion of the term “tolerance” in relation to the world of medieval Islam and to the Islamic attitude towards the ‘other’, see Lewis, Jews, pp. 3–66; see also Friedmann, Tolerance; and the concluding paragraph of this article.
As a result of this Divine reproof, Abraham immediately changed his mind and decided to offer the Zoroastrian his hospitality.²

In Islamic mysticism, the tolerant attitude towards the ‘other’ may also be explained by the importance assigned by Muslim mystics to the spiritual combat waged against the lower self of man, the human ego (al-nafs). According to this perception, in order to draw closer to God and perhaps even unite with Him, the mystic must constantly purify his inner spiritual realm from the dangerous maneuverings of the nafs, from its conceit and pride.³ From this psychological and ethical perspective, man is required to concentrate on his own vices, directing his spiritual and religious energy inward, not outward—a tendency which is especially characteristic of the malāmatiyya (“those who adhere to the path of blame”), who assert that the mystic should internalize and conceal his spiritual and mystical achievements. Certain malāmatīs even went so far as to commit sins in public in order to attract criticism and condemnation.⁴ Hence, it is not surprising to discover that Muslim mystics are at times reluctant to criticize fellow Muslims or even the adherents of other religions; they perceive such criticism as an expression of man’s nafs, of his self-pride and self-admiration. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that most orthodox Islamic mystical writings express a clear hierarchal worldview according to which Islam is superior to all other religions and the mystical way of life is the most perfect path to be taken by Muslims. Thus, the

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2 al-Qushayrī, al-Risāla, p. 133 (Bāb al-rajā’, no. 572):

وَقِيلَ إِنِّي مَجِيساً أَسْتَضِفَتْ إِبْرَاهِيمُ الخَلِيلِ عَلَى الْسَّلَامِ فَقَالَ لَهُ إِنَّ أَسْلَمْتُ أُصْفَتْكَ فَقَالَ إِبْرَاهِيمُ مَجِيساً إِذَا أَسْلَمْتُ فَأَيُّ مَنْ تَكُونَ لَكِ فَرِيّ الْمَجِيسِ فَأْوِيْنِي إِلَى إِبْرَاهِيمُ عَلَى الْسَّلَامِ بَلْ أَسْلَمْتُ لِأَسْلَمْحُ أَنْ أَنْقِسِهُ إِلَيْهِ يَتَبَيَّنُ نِسِبَةً صَغِيرَةً فَقَالَ لَهُ إِبْرَاهِيمُ وَقَالَ مَجِيساً إِذَا أَسْلَمْتُ فَأَيُّ مَنْ تَكُونَ لَكِ فَرِيّ الْمَجِيسِ فَأْوِيْنِي إِلَى إِبْرَاهِيمُ عَلَى الْسَّلَامِ بَلْ أَسْلَمْتُ لِأَسْلَمْحُ أَنْ أَنْقِسِهُ إِلَيْهِ يَتَبَيَّنُ نِسِبَةً صَغِيرَةً فَقَالَ لَهُ إِبْرَاهِيمُ وَقَالَ مَجِيساً إِذَا أَسْلَمْتُ فَأَيُّ مَنْ تَكُونَ لَكِ فَرِيّ الْمَجِيسِ فَأْوِيْنِي إِلَى إِبْرَاهِيمُ عَلَى الْسَّلَامِ بَلْ أَسْلَمْتُ لِأَسْلَمْحُ أَنْ أَنْقِسِهُ إِلَيْهِ يَتَبَيَّنُ نِسِبَةً صَغِيرَةً 

See also the story of Ibn al-Mubārak and the Non-Arab unbeliever (‘īfī) in ibid., p. 134 (no. 576). For a compassionate attitude towards a mukhannath (an effeminate man or a homosexual), see ibid., p. 135 (no. 579), and towards a Muslim sinner who drinks wine, see ibid., p. 227 (bāb al-futuwwa, no. 1034). Finally, see the ḥadīth quoted at the end of bāb al-khulūq, ibid., p. 242 (no. 1106): “The messenger of Allah was asked to curse the polytheists; he said: ‘I was sent only out of mercy, not as chastisement’.”

3 See van Ess, Gedankenwelt, index, s.v. “nafs”; Sviri, “The Self”; eadem, Taste, index, s.v. “nafs”.

4 On the malāmatiyya see Sviri, “Ḥakīm Tirmidhi”.

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