

Mystical Legacy, An Antidote to Fanaticism

By Farhang Jahanpour, GCGI Conference, 31 August 2014

The prolific author, novelist and historian, A. N. Wilson, who originally studied theology at Oxford, later on left the church and declared himself an atheist, and again in an article on 11 April 2009 in Daily Mail announced his conversion to Christianity, in a hard-hitting pamphlet in the Counter-Blast series in 1991 wrote: “It is said in the Bible that the love of money is the root of all evil. It might be truer to say that the love of God is the root of all evil. Religion is the tragedy of mankind. It appeals to all that is noblest, purest, loftiest in the human spirit, and yet there scarcely exists a religion which has not been responsible for wars, tyrannies and the suppression of the truth. Marx described it as the opium of the people; but it is much deadlier than opium. It does not send people to sleep. It excites them to persecute one another, to exalt their own feelings and opinions above those of others, to claim for themselves a possession of the truth.”¹

Anyone who is familiar with the history of religious wars from the early Biblical wars, to the Crusades, the Albigensian Crusade (1209–1229) the Reformation, European wars of religion (1524-1648), the wars between the Sunni Ottomans and Shia Safavids, but most particularly the jihadi wars during the past few decades knows that religion can be a powerful source of conflict and discord. At the moment, from Libya, to Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan, Gaza, Somalia, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and beyond one can see the most brutal wars being waged often in the name of militant and political Islam, the worst example of which were provided by the Taliban, the al-Qaeda, and lately by the ISIS, claiming to establish an Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria.

Earlier this month (August 2014) on the 100th anniversary of the declaration of war on Germany that later came to be known as the First World War we were reminded of the chaos that prevailed in European capitals about what to do after the assassination of the Austrian archduke. The decisions on what to do were in the hands of people who had reached their lowest levels of incompetence. What we appear to be witnessing in the Middle East and Ukraine and the responses in Western capitals to those events suggests that, in comparison, 1914 Europe was a model of enlightenment. It seems that we have not learned anything from all those calamitous events and continue repeating the same old mistakes time and time again. Some of this madness may be due to the lack of spiritual insight and to the loss of vision.

¹ A. N. Wilson, *Against Religion: Why We Should Try to Live Without It* (Counterblast, No. 19) Chatto and Windus, London, 1991, p.1.

Even in our materialistic and technological world, ideas still have great power to move the multitudes and create global movements. However, what seems to be totally lacking in our neoliberal, profit-driven world, dominated by the military-industrial complex, is any strategic or global thinking and any overall plan or strategy. We lack moral ideas and spiritual insights that have driven humanity in the past. The vacuum created by the lack of a humane, over-arching outlook has been sadly filled by militant religious ideologies.

The problem with all contemporary religious movements that commit the most barbaric atrocities in the name of religion is that they often know very little about religion. In July 2014, Yusuf Sarwar and Mohammed Ahmed, two jihadi wannabes, pleaded guilty to terrorist offenses in the United Kingdom. Intelligence services discovered that before they set out from Birmingham to fight in Syria, they had ordered two books online from Amazon, *Islam for dummies* and *The Koran for Dummies*. This anecdote underscores a very important point that many of these fanatical jihadists have very little knowledge of Islam, and the primary drivers of their actions are social and political grievances or perhaps a burning desire for adventure, rather than religious faith.

Some of the other fundamentalists who happen to know something about religion take their religious texts literally, and put them above all the highest moral precepts and even the noblest faculty that we possess, namely our rationality and common sense. They have reduced the entire, varied scope of Islamic civilisation, philosophy, literature, arts, mysticism, jurisprudence, Kalam and tafsir (hermeneutics) to the Shari'a, and even their understanding of the Shari'a is a very narrow and dogmatic view that has been rejected by the greatest minds in Islam. They have subjected their greatest gifts as human beings, namely their souls and their rationality, to blind faith. As Emerson wrote:

“Smother no dictate of your soul, but indulge it. There are passages in the history of Jesus which to some minds seem defects in his character. Probably a more full apprehension of his history will show you these passages in a more agreeable light. Meantime count them defects, and do not stifle your moral faculty, and force it to call what it thinks evil, good. For there is no being in the universe whose integrity is so precious to you as that of your soul.”²

Perhaps the most powerful antidote to narrow and militant religious views can be found in religious scriptures themselves. What most people forget is that the calling and mission of all religions have been to provide a mystical and non-materialistic view of reality and man's encounter with the world. All religions have started with a vision, with an overpowering encounter with the divine. Although outwardly great religions have been very different from one another,

² Ralph Waldo Emerson, Journals, November 29, 1830

yet all of them speak about a reality that transcends the physical universe. The founders of great religions have claimed to be in communion with that higher reality. They have spoken about the ‘journey in God’, of intense longing for God and devotion of the soul to God, of surrender and purification, of renunciation and abandonment, through union in Love. It has been said that all mystics recognise one another, because they come from the same spiritual realm.

Religions have always started with abstract, spiritual and mystical ideas, and dogmas and rituals have been introduced much later. Buddha attained enlightenment through contemplation and his mission was to persuade others to also follow the path of meditation and renunciation of the material world of pain and suffering.

According to Zoroastrian scriptures, at the age of fifteen, Zoroaster or Zarathushtra withdrew from the world and spent many years in retirement, thirsting to commune with the Heavenly Father. At last, after a long period of thirst and longing, Vohu Manah, the embodiment of the Good Mind, appeared unto him in a vision and led his soul in holy trance into the presence of Ahura Mazda. From then onward, Zoroaster spoke with conviction and with the voice of authority. Not only had he obtained an experience of God’s reality, he even was made aware of God’s laws:

“O Lord! Through Thy wisdom I recognized Thee as beneficent, when I saw Thee as primal at the birth of the world, when Thou by Thy power didst establish deeds and words provided with reward— An evil reward for evil, a good reward for good, at the last turning-point of the creation.”³

Krishna’s experience of the divine is described in the Bhagavad Gita in the following powerful words: “If the radiance of a thousand suns were to burst at once into the sky, that would be like the splendour of the mighty one.”⁴

Moses had the experience of an encounter with the divine when he saw the Burning Bush. In the case of Jesus, we read: “And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him.”⁵

Muhammad received his first revelation in a cave called Hira, when he was visited by Arch-Angel Gabriel who revealed to him the first verse from the Koran. The Koran refers to that experience as follows:

“It is a revelation which has been revealed to him, and taught to him by the great mighty one. Then He stood straight, and He appeared on the

³ Yasna 57.4

⁴ Bhagavad Gita XI:12

⁵ Matthew 3:16

uppermost horizon. He then came nearer and nearer until He was as close to him as the distance of two bows, or even less."⁶

Mysticism has been the essence of all religions, although gradually dogmas and rituals have overshadowed the mystical and spiritual elements. In Arabic and Persian, the term *Irfan* or mysticism comes from the root *Arafa*, to know, to recognise, rather than simply having learned about something. It corresponds to seeing and feeling and knowing the Truth, rather than having heard or read about it. In Rumi's words,

"Goosham shanid qesse-ye iman-o mast shod.

Ku sahm-e chashm surat-e imanam arezust"

My ears have heard the story of faith and have become intoxicated.

Where is the portion of my eyes, I wish to see the face of the Truth.⁷

In English the word mysticism comes from the same root as 'myth' or 'mystery'. All are derived from the Greek word *musteion*: which means to close the eye or the mouth, to close oneself to the outside world and to open the inner eye to that which cannot be seen with the physical eye. Therefore, both the Persian and the English terms are rooted in an experience of contemplation or silence. They are not popular words in our contemporary world. The word 'myth', for example, is often used as a synonym for a lie, for something that is not true. Also the word 'mystery' is something that needs to be cleared up, to be sorted out, to be understood by our intellect. It is frequently associated with muddled thinking. Similarly, 'mysticism' is frequently associated with woolly-headed people, daydreamers or even cranks.

However, mysticism does not deal merely with mystery, but also with the sacred. Sacred, too, is one of a whole group of cognate words, including sacrament, sacrilege, consecrate, sacrosanct, sacrifice which means to make sacred. Therefore, mysticism gives sanctity to the material world, and even makes the profane sacred.

A quick glance at various religious scriptures shows that they dwell much more upon the mystical aspects of religion, and their mission is basically an otherworldly and spiritual mission.

Zoroastrianism

In Zoroastrianism, one of the oldest religions in the world, predating Judaism and perhaps even Hinduism, the first important point that is stressed is the existence of an Omniscient Creator called Ahura Mazda. The name Ahura Mazda is full of significance. *Ahura* (Sanskrit *Asura*) means "Lord of Life". He

⁶ The Koran 53:4-9

⁷ Rumi, Divan-e Shams, Ghazal No. 441

is the Creator and upholder of all life, and thus represents the spirit side of the universe. Mazda may be explained as made up from *maz* (Sanskrit *mah*) and the root *da* (Sanskrit *dha*), and the word may be translated as “Creator of Life and Creator of Matter”. Thus this name brings out the fundamental duality of our visible universe - Spirit and Matter. It implies that the Supreme Being is the Creator and Upholder of these two great principles.

This supreme Ahura Mazda is necessarily invisible and intangible to our physical senses. He can only be “seen” through the “eye of the spirit”.⁸ For human beings He must necessarily remain a mere name. To understand Him, therefore, Zoroaster has pointed out a method through the *Amesha-Spenta* (usually translated as the ‘Holy Immortals’). In later ages, these have been understood as almost equivalent to archangels, deities standing next to the Godhead in rank, each with a special ‘department’ of the universe assigned to him or her to look after.

There are six *Amesha-Spentas*, three masculine and three feminine.⁹ The masculine ones are:

- 1- *Asha*, the Eternal Law of God or the Supreme Righteousness.
- 2- *Vohu-Mana*, ‘the Loving Mind’ or ‘Love’. In Yasna the worshipper and the worshipped are called ‘the Lover and the Beloved.’
- 3- *Kshathra*, After achieving Righteousness and Love one should translated them into action. He must seek the help of the third ‘Aspect’ of the Lord, *Kshathra*, who represents the strength of the Lord - bestowed upon those who truly serve their brothers. It is the Creative Activity of the Supreme.

Feminine *Amesha-Spentas* are:

- 1- *Armaiti*, usually translated piety, it is the counterpart of Asha on the Mother side. She is the ‘Daughter of Ahura Mazda’ and our ultimate refuge.
- 2- *Ameretat*, is immortality.
- 3- *Hauravat* is Wholeness or Perfection.

This wonderful and poetic teaching of the Holy Immortals may be summed up thus: Every human being must understand the Eternal Law of God of Truth and Righteousness. He must realise the power of Love, and he must translate both these into acts of Loving Service. All through his striving he must hold fast to Faith and thus attain the Goal of Perfection and Immortality.

The terms used to describe Ahura Mazda are always warm and friendly. He is portrayed not as a stern judge but as loving and accessible. He is over and over celebrated in the *Gathas* in many beautiful terms. Ahura is always referred to

⁸ *Yasna*: 45.8

⁹ *Yasna*, 45.4

as a Kind Friend or a Loving Father. He is consulted at the time of difficulties. He is questioned at moments of uncertainty. Communion with Him always leads to satisfaction and assurance.

Hinduism

Hinduism is primarily based on a mystical view of reality, and it preaches that the whole universe is part and parcel of God. Brahma, which is the Sanskrit word for the Absolute, is the supreme divinity who is transcendent as well as immanent, beyond all limitations and definitions. He is the principle of search as well as the object sought, the animating ideal and its fulfilment. *Mundakya Upanishad* says about Him: “He is the Lord of all, that from which all things originate, and in which they finally disappear.”¹⁰

Brahma is the immanent ground and operative principle in all subjects and objects. At the beginning of *Kena Upanishad* we read:

“What cannot be spoken with words, but that whereby words are spoken; know that alone to be Brahma, the Spirit, and not what people here adore. What cannot be thought with the mind, but that whereby mind can think; know that alone to be Brahma, the Spirit, and not what people here adore.”¹¹

Chandogya Upanishad expresses the spiritual experience of Brahma in these words: “There is a Spirit which is mind and life, light and truth and vast spaces. He contains all works and desires and all perfumes and all tastes. He enfolds the whole universe, and in silence is loving to all.”¹²

The following passage from the *Bhagavadgita* expresses beautifully the all-inclusive nature of Brahma:

“I am the creation and the dissolution of the whole universe. There is not anything greater than I, and all things hung on me, even as precious gems upon a string. I am moisture in the water, light in the sun and moon, invocation in the Vedas, sound in the firmament, human nature in mankind, sweet-smelling savour in the earth, glory in the source of light. In all things I am life; and I am zeal in the zealous; and know O Arjoon that I am the eternal seed of all nature. I am the understanding of the wise, the glory of the proud, the strength of the strong, free from lust and anger.”¹³

Mudaka Upanishad expresses the same doctrine in a different way:

As from a well-blazing fire, sparks

¹⁰ *Mundakya Upanishad, Chapter One, verse VI.*

¹¹ *Kena Upanishad, Part 1, 4-8*

¹² *Chandogya Upanishad, III xiv 2-3*

¹³ *Bhagavadgita, Chapter VII, verse 2*

By the thousand issue forth of like form,
So from the imperishable, my friend, beings manifold
Are produced, and thither also go.¹⁴

Hinduism preaches an unbounded toleration of all other religions, because although they may differ in appearance yet in reality they are all of the same substance. A Hindu song says:

Into the bosom of the one great sea
Flows streams that come from hills on every side;
Their names are various as their springs;
And thus in every land do men bow down
To one great God, though known by many names.¹⁵

Buddhism

In Buddhism, the renunciation of the material world and the attainment of Nirvana are the supreme goals. Some Western scholars have seen Nirvana as something negative and otherworldly, but this seems perverse to the Buddhists, for whom Nirvana is above all supreme happiness. The main schools of Indian Buddhism agree that Nirvana is not a mere negation. Rather it is unconditional *dharma*, not expressible in spatial or temporal terms; knowledge of it dissolves ignorance and ends craving.

Nirvana means total extinction. However, Nirvana is not total nothingness. It contains the concept of the Void, the *sonyata*. By avoiding the two extremes, indulgence in sensual pleasure and self-mortification, Gautama Buddha has gained the enlightenment of the middle path which produces insight, and conduces to tranquillity, to higher knowledge, to Enlightenment, to Nirvana.

According to Buddhist scriptures, Nirvana is ineffable and inexpressible, and we cannot employ any category to describe what the Void is. Nothing can be said of it. However, it is something. It is that thing out of which everything comes. The Buddhists call it *Suchness* or *Whateverness* of being. It is the underlying unity of all things. It is the great reservoir of all possible potentialities. It is the ground of being, in the same way that the ocean is the ground of the waves. All waves, whatever their shapes and forms, have the same water and formlessness as their substance, their suchness.

In its negative aspect, it is our total extinction to self and to all that is not God. In its positive side, it is the union of us with the great Source. Nirvana is release because it is the awareness of the illusoriness of all phenomenal being and their union with the Great Void. Life is like an ever-flowing river, never being the

¹⁴ *Mudaka Upanishad, The Second Mundaka: First Khanda, Mantra No. 1*

¹⁵ South Indian folksong, Charles E. Gover, *The Folk-Songs of Southern India*, (Madras, Higginbotham and Co., 1871) p. 165

same. We want to cross the river to the other side, which is Nirvana. Buddhism is the boat, which will carry us to the other side. After crossing not only one leaves behind the first shore and the river, but also the boat that has transported one to this shore; so that at that point even Buddha and Buddhism do not exist any longer. One achieves one's own Buddhahood and Enlightenment.

In some ways, one can compare Nirvana to the paradise of the theists, provided that paradise is not regarded as a physical space. Edward Conze points out that the Buddhists often use the same imagery as the theists:

“We are told that Nirvana is permanent, stable, imperishable, immovable, ageless, deathless, unborn, and unbecome, that it is power, bliss and happiness, the secure refuge, the shelter and the place of unassailable security; that it is the real Truth and the supreme Reality; that it is the good, the supreme good, and the one and only consummation of our life, the eternal, hidden and incomprehensible Peace.”¹⁶

Judaism

The Semitic or Abrahamic religions also have very strong mystical elements in their belief systems. The biblical God is also both immanent and transcendent. He is the God of the farthest remoteness and yet he is the One who is with man and to whom man may cry “Hear my prayer!” “The Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon him, to all that call upon him in truth.”¹⁷ “Seek thee the Lord while he may be found, call thee upon him while he is near.”¹⁸ Hence, to speak of the expansion of life may be a true word of prayer: “Hear me when I call, O God of my righteousness: thou hast enlarged me when I was in distress; have mercy upon me, and hear my prayer.”¹⁹

In Hebrew scriptures He and Thou are made to follow immediately upon one another; all meditation about God soon resolves itself into invocations addressed to him, into an expression of personal intimacy and connection: “The Lord is a high tower for the oppressed, a high tower in times of trouble, and they that know thy name put their trust in thee: for thou, Lord, hast not forsaken them that seek thee.”²⁰

To know of this One God, in whom all things and each thing find meaning and significance, to bear witness to Him, constitutes the monotheism given to the world by the Prophets of Israel. Man experiences in himself the meaning of breathing in that air of infinitude and eternity, which embraces his earthly

¹⁶ Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development*, Oxford U.P., 1959, p 40.

¹⁷ Psalm 145:18

¹⁸ Isaiah 55:6

¹⁹ Psalm 4:1

²⁰ Psalm 9:9-10

existence. “The nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord God my refuge,” thus the Psalmist expresses his yearning.²¹

“The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein.” “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.”²²

“All nations are as nothing before him, they are counted to him less than nothing and vanity.” They are only a “drop in a bucket” or “the small dust of the balance.” The parts of the earth are like “a grain of sand,” and a thousand years are in his sight “but as yesterday when it is passed.”²³ “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows his handiwork.”²⁴ “O Lord our God, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! Thou has set thy glory above the heavens.”²⁵

God is “from everlasting to everlasting,” and yet has “been our dwelling place in all generations.” “For thus says the High and Lofty One that inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy and: I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.”²⁶ Anxiety and confidence unite together. There is exaltation and there is awe. As the prophet, in like mood says: “Then you will see and be radiant, and thy heart shall tremble and be enlarged.”²⁷

Christianity

With its concepts of Jesus being the Son of God, his Resurrection and ascension to Heaven, the Eucharist, and baptism, Christianity is essentially based on mysticism. Christian belief and practice concerns the preparation of man for entry into the Kingdom of God, and for the consciousness of direct and transformative presence of God as embodied by Jesus. In the earliest extant material about Jesus’s teaching as set out in the writings of St. Paul we have the concept of the renewal of man’s mind or soul through contemplating what Jesus did on the Cross, thus opening our hearts to the Holy Spirit.

As in both Judaism and Islam, man’s attainment to the “presence” of God, rather than “union” with Him is a more accurate description of Christian belief. Christianity preaches personal transformation, not so much through intellectual endeavour or physical acts, but by having faith and opening oneself to divine

²¹ Psalm 73:28

²² Psalm 24:1

²³ Isaiah 40:17

²⁴ Psalm 19:1

²⁵ Psalm 8:1

²⁶ Isaiah 57:15

²⁷ Isaiah 60:5

grace. The Gospels teach us that God enables the believers to be “partakers of the divine nature.”²⁸ Jesus’s prayer for his followers during the last supper was:

“You, Father, are in Me, and I in you; [I pray] that they may be one in Us.”²⁹ According to St. Paul, “[There is] one God and Father of all who is above all and through all and in all.”³⁰ According to John, “He who abides in love abides in God and God in him.”³¹

This universal vision that sees God as the Father of all mankind and preaches that he who abides in love abides in God are so removed from narrow and dogmatic ideas of fundamentalists who try to turn religion into an exclusive domain of a few individuals, while excluding others from God’s family. Christianity is emphatic that “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.”³² Jesus taught us, “In my Father’s house are many mansions...”³³

Islam

The Koran preaches almost the same concepts. According to the Koran, God is everywhere and is open to all: “Whithersoever you turn there is the face of God.”³⁴ God does not reside only in the heavens or the outside world, but also in the soul of man: “We shall show them our signs in the heavens and in their own souls.”³⁵ God is manifest both in the world of nature and supremely in the soul of man: “If my servants inquire of thee concerning Me, lo, I am near.”³⁶ Indeed, “God is closer to man than his own jugular vein.”³⁷ The Islamic prayer addresses God as “He who is far and cannot be seen and is close and hears every whisper.” A supreme expression of God’s effulgence can be seen in the Light Verse of the Koran:

“God is the Light of the heavens and the earth; the likeness of His Light is as a niche wherein is a lamp, the lamp in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star, kindled from a Blessed Tree, an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West whose oil wellnigh would shine, even if no fire touched it; Light upon Light; God guides to His Light whom He will. And God strikes similitudes for men, and God has knowledge of everything.”³⁸

²⁸ 2 Peter 1:4

²⁹ John 17:21

³⁰ Ephesians 4:6

³¹ 1 John 4:16

³² Romans 8:14

³³ John 14:2

³⁴ The Koran 2:115

³⁵ The Koran 41:53

³⁶ The Koran 2: 186

³⁷ The Koran 50:16

³⁸ The Koran 24:35

The idea of closeness to God is frequently reflected in Koranic verses. The merging of the Lover and the Beloved is a recurring theme in the Koran: “Then He turned to them, that they might turn [to God]. For God is Oft-returning, Most Merciful.”³⁹ God is pleased with all those who follow Him: “God was pleased with them, and they were well pleased with God.”⁴⁰ So God addresses the blessed saints in Paradise: “O thou soul in peace, return to thy Lord, pleased with Him and He pleased with you;”⁴¹ for “He loves them and they love Him.”⁴² This last verse is of great significance as supporting the Sufi doctrine of Love (*mahabba*) and as providing the ultimate authority for the idea of a trinity of Lover, Beloved and Love. These inclusive and mystical beliefs of Islam are so at variance with the dogmatic views of Muslim fundamentalists, let alone various terrorist groups who commit their acts in the name of Islam.

Baha’i Faith

The Baha’i Faith, the youngest world religion, also puts a great deal of emphasis on mysticism. Bahauallah, the founder of the faith, and other leading figures of the faith, the Bab and Abdul-Baha, also provided a mystical and spiritual interpretation of the world and the reality behind it.

According to Baha’i scriptures, it is only by dying to self and moving beyond the limits of material existence that we can see the divine truth. In his beautiful *Hidden Words*, Bahauallah wrote:

"O Son of Dust! Blind thine eyes, that thou mayest behold My beauty; stop thine ears, that thou mayest hearken unto the sweet melody of My voice; empty thyself of all learning, that thou mayest partake of My knowledge; and sanctify thyself from riches, that thou mayest obtain a lasting share from the ocean of My eternal wealth. Blind thine eyes, that is, to all save My beauty; stop thine ears to all save My word; empty thyself of all learning save the knowledge of Me; that with a clear vision, a pure heart and an attentive ear thou mayest enter the court of My holiness."⁴³

Bahá’u’lláh warns us of the traps that await us when we abuse imagination and dwell upon mundane issues alone:

“People for the most part delight in superstitions. They regard a single drop of the sea of delusion as preferable to an ocean of certitude. By holding fast unto names they deprive themselves of the inner reality and by clinging to vain imaginings they are kept back from the Dayspring of heavenly signs.

³⁹ The Koran 9:117

⁴⁰ The Koran 58:22

⁴¹ The Koran 89:27

⁴² The Koran 5:57

⁴³ The Hidden Words of Bahá’u’lláh: 11

God grant you may be graciously aided under all conditions to shatter the idols of superstition and to tear away the veils of the imaginations of men.”⁴⁴

Baha’i Scriptures also make clear that imagination itself is a spiritual power:

“Man has also spiritual powers: imagination, which conceives things; thought, which reflects upon realities; comprehension, which comprehends realities; memory, which retains whatever man imagines, thinks and comprehends.”⁴⁵

In other words, human beings possess some form of transcendent capacity to tune into dimensions of existence hidden from our basic senses:

Though man has powers and outer senses in common with the animal, yet an extraordinary power exists in him of which the animal is bereft. The sciences, arts, inventions, trades and discoveries of realities are the results of this spiritual power. . . . It even perceives things which do not exist outwardly—that is to say, intellectual realities which are not sensible, and which have no outward existence because they are invisible; so it comprehends the mind, the spirit, the qualities, the characters, the love and sorrow of man, which are intellectual realities. Moreover, these existing sciences, arts, laws and endless inventions of man at one time were invisible, mysterious and hidden secrets; it is only the all-encompassing human power which has discovered and brought them out from the plane of the invisible to the plane of the visible.”⁴⁶

Persian Sufism

One can find the most beautiful poetic expression of Islamic mysticism in the works of Persian Sufi poets, especially Sana’i, Attar, Rumi, Sa’di and Hafiz and many others. Here I only wish to refer briefly to some of Rumi’s poems, which have become very popular in the West recently.

Sufism is a term that is applied to Islamic mysticism. Etymologically, the word Sufi comes from the word *Suf* or wool, referring to coarse woollen cloaks that most Sufis wore, as to *Safa* or purity.

To the Sufis, faith is a fateful act of personal choosing and personal enlightenment. According to the Sufis, every inner prompting of conscience, every glimmering sense of beauty, every response we make to music, every experience we have of love - whether human or divine - and every experience of bereavement, reminds us of the power of spirit within us. When religion is

⁴⁴ *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 58

⁴⁵ Selected Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: Five Physical and Five Spiritual Powers, p. 317

⁴⁶ Abdul-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 186

institutionalized, there is a danger that man's spiritual identity will be negated by the institutions, man's personal link with God will be severed, and God's absoluteness will be denied.

Sufi ideas started shortly after the birth of Islam and there were many early Arab Sufis. However, Sufism achieved its greatest poetic expression in the hands of some great writers and poets, including Attar, Sana'i, Rumi, Sa'di and Hafiz, who turned the Persian language into one of the greatest repositories of mystical expressions.

In this short lecture I only wish to speak briefly about Rumi. Born nearly eight hundred years ago, Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207-1273) has influenced countless generations in Iran and in the entire Islamic world, and lately he has become the best-read poet in America. Recent translations of his poems have become bestsellers, and have sold in hundreds of thousands of copies. The fact that Rumi's poems are still on our lips and that his fame has spread to the lands far from his native home testifies to the power, the vision and the beauty of his poetry and his mystical vision.

His Spiritual and literary influence is pervasive in the East. He has had great influence on subsequent poets not only in Iran, but also in the whole Islamic world, most notably in Turkey and India. From the Iranian poets, Hafiz and Jami in the 14th and 15th centuries, right up to Muhammad Iqbal Lahori at the beginning of the 20th century, many poets have taken him as their model and have tried to imitate his mystical verse.

The great Cambridge scholar Professor R. A. Nicholson was one of the first Western scholars to translate Rumi's voluminous Mathnavi and many poems of his Divan, together with extensive notes and biographical information, into English. He called Rumi the greatest mystical poet of the world. Professor Nicholson's successor at Cambridge, Professor A. J. Arberry, also produced extensive translations from the work of Rumi, including *Mystical Poems of Rumi*, *Tales from Mathnavi* and *More Tales from Mathnavi*, as well as many works on Sufism. However, in recent years many British, German and American scholars and poets have produced dozens of volumes of scholarly work on Rumi and have made him almost a household name in literary circles.

According to the Sufis, there is One Divine Being, the *Haq* or Ultimate Reality, which is the ground of all being. He reveals himself in the world and in the soul of man as Divine Self-Manifestation. According to Rumi, "Our book is the shop of Unity. Apart from Unity whatever else you see is idolatry." While forms are transient, the essence is eternal, and it is the essence that binds everything together. "Praise be to Almighty Love, that binds a hundred thousands objects together. While scattered like grains of sand, the Master Potter shapes them into beautiful pots."

God is both Immanent and Transcendent. While absent from vision, He is the ground of understanding and is manifest beyond appearance. The Divine Essence is unknowable, but we can know God through his Names and Attributes and indeed through his magnificent handiwork, the natural world and man's soul. The Divine Mind, which rules and animates the Cosmos, displays itself most fully in the Perfect Man. There is a trinity of Lover, Love and Beloved, with God and man being both lovers and beloved. "A thirsty man seeks water, and water also awaits the thirsty person." Prophets, saints and seers are channels for divine revelation in the physical world. Therefore, all religions are basically divine and there is no difference between them.

These concepts give Sufism a universal outlook and consequently it is the most perfect antidote to the deadly fanaticism, aridity and fundamentalism that have gripped the world, especially among extremist Islamic groups, at the moment. The poetry of Rumi and other Sufis can lead us away from the darkness of religious bigotry and fanaticism towards the light of unity and tolerance.

Although Rumi's poems were written some 800 years ago, they are as fresh and as relevant to our contemporary world as most contemporary writings. According to Rumi, one of the reasons why man goes wrong, and why instead of being a source of salvation religion becomes a curse is because people ignore the essence and turn to dogmas and rituals and outside manifestation of religiosity. The late Professor Wilfred Cantwell-Smith of the University of McGill in his book *The Mystery and End of Religion* says that religion can be divided into two parts: "Faith" that is a personal matter and concerns belief in spiritual values or a revelation from God like that of Moses, Christ or Muhammad. The other aspect of religion is what he calls "accumulated traditions."⁴⁷ He speaks about the process of reification as the result of which spiritual values gradually turn into immovable and rigid dogma.

To Rumi, as to most Sufis, what was important was the essence of religion, rather than its outward form and the accumulated traditions. To him, man's true reality does not reside in his physical consciousness and in his "flesh and bones", but in his inner soul. He tells us:

You are soul, and you are love,
not a sprite or an angel or a human being⁴⁸

Once we have become conscious of divine love, our material existence loses its attraction:

Inside this new love, die.

⁴⁷ Wilfred Cantwell-Smith, *The Mystery and End of Religion* (Fortress Press, 1991)

⁴⁸ Rumi: *The Book of Love, Translations and Commentary by Coleman Barks*, (Harper Collins, 2003), p. 13. All subsequent quotations from the work of Rumi come from this book, unless stated otherwise.

Your way begins on the other side.
Become the sky.
Take an axe to the prison wall.
Escape. Walk out
like someone suddenly born into color.
Do it now.
You're covered with thick cloud.
Slide out the side. Die
and be quiet. Quietness is the surest
sign that you've died
Your old life was a frantic running
from silence.
The speechless full moon comes out now.⁴⁹

The Form and the Essence

Instead of dividing religion into faith and accumulated traditions, Rumi defines the two aspects of religion as “essence and shell”. In a bold line he says: “ma ze-qoran maghz ra bardashtim, pust ra pish-e sagan begzashtim.”

We have taken the essence from the Koran,
We have left its skin to the dogs.

What is the essence or the heart of religion? I would argue that mysticism is the heart of all religions. True religion is about a sense of awe and wonder at the majesty of being, being concerned about the meaning of life, the life of the mind or soul, the appreciation of beauty, and the world of imagination. In the words of Rumi:

“An invisible bird flies over,
But casts a quick shadow.
What is body? That shadow of a shadow
of your love, that somehow contains
the entire universe.”⁵⁰

The aim of religion is to discover the source of that shadow. Rumi is able to verbalize the highly personal experience of spiritual growth and mysticism in a very forward and direct fashion. He does not offend or exclude anyone. He includes and enriches everyone. To Rumi, religion should be the source of joy and enlightenment, uplifting the human soul from mundane preoccupations of daily living, not a cause of morbidity, fear and disunity. In a famous poem after meeting with Shams-e Tabriz and achieving his mystical vision, Rumi wrote:

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 33

⁵⁰ Coleman Barks and John Moyne, *The Essence of Rumi* (Harper, 1995), p 15

I was dead, I came alive
I was tears, I became laughter
All because of love
When it arrived
From then on
My temporal life
Changed to eternal⁵¹

Love is the elixir of life, that mystical element that binds man to God and to the entire world. In the words of Rumi

To Love is to reach God.
Never will a Lover's chest
feel any sorrow.
Never will a Lover's robe
be touched by mortals.
Never will a Lover's body
be found buried in the earth.
To Love is to reach God.

Another idea of Rumi that I wish to explore is that God is abstract and the only way that we can know Him is through his invisible work within us. He inspires all our thoughts, our arts, and even our love.

In your light I learn how to love.
In your beauty, how to make poems.

You dance inside my chest
where no one sees you,

but sometimes I do,
and that sight becomes this art⁵²

Instead of turning our eyes to that invisible reality behind the existence, at times we become too preoccupied with His manifestations to the extent that we forget the reality behind those outward forms.

Sana', a forerunner and teacher of Rumi, puts it this way:

Khod bekhod shakl-e div mikardand

Pas zetarsash ghariv mikardand

“With their own hands they draw the image of a demon

⁵¹ For the translation of the whole poem see: Coleman Barks and John Moyne, *The Essence of Rumi* (Harper, 1995), pp. 134-35

⁵² Rumi, *The Book of Love*, p. 7

Then due to their fear of it they would wail and prostrate themselves.”

Is it not exactly what most of us do? The images can sometimes be made of stone and clay, or they could be intellectual, mental and spiritual. Yet some texts, some concepts and ideas become sacred for us and we are prepared to go to any length in order to defend those texts. As Emerson said: “We shall not always set so great a price on a few texts, on a few lives.”

The purpose of religion is not to teach us to revere a text or a person, but to love the truth behind them and live by love. To Rumi, love transcends everything, and this vision makes him not a follower of any religion or denizen of any land, but a lover of Truth and a citizen of the world. It is one thing to say that we believe in our religion, we believe it to be superior to other faiths, but we wish to live with harmony with others, and another thing to say that there is only one reality and different faiths and beliefs are simply rays from that divine source. This is why Rumi says:

Nor Christian or Jew or Muslim, not Hindu,
Buddhist, Sufi, or Zen. Not any religion
or cultural system. I am not from the East
or the West, not out of the ocean or up
from the ground, not natural or ethereal, not
composed of elements at all. I do not exist,
am not an entity in this world or the next,
did not descend from Adam and Eve or any
origin story. My place is placeless, a trace
of the traceless. Neither body or soul.

I belong to the beloved, have seen the two
worlds as one and that one call to and know,
first, last, outer, inner, only that
breath breathing human being.

There is a way between voice and presence
where information flows.

In disciplined silence it opens,
With wandering talk it closes.

Therefore, the essence of religion is dissolving ourselves in love, oneness
and truth.

When matter dissolves in the Ocean
The particles glow. As who I am now
Melts in a candleflame, identity

Becomes one vast motion.⁵³

In his lovely poem “Moses and the Shepherd” (did musa yek shabani ra berah) Rumi writes:

Moses heard a shepherd on the road praying,
“God,
where are you? I want to help You, to fix your shoes
and comb your hair. I want to wash your clothes
and pick the lice off. I want to bring you milk,
to kiss your little hands and feet when it’s time
for you to go to bed. I want to sweep your room
and keep it neat. God, my sheep and goats
are yours. All I can say, remembering you,
is ayyyyy and ahhhhhh.”

Moses could stand it no longer.

“Who are you talking to?
The one who made us,
And made the earth and made the sky?”
Don’t talk about shoes
And socks with God! And what’s this *with your little hands
And feet?* Such blasphemous familiarity sounds like
You’re chatting with your uncles....

The shepherd felt ashamed. He repented and tore his clothes and sighed
and wandered out into the desert

A sudden revelation
came then to Moses. God’s voice:
You have separated me
from one of my own. Did you come as a Prophet to unite,
or to sever?
I have given each being a separate and unique way
of seeing and knowing and saying that knowledge.
What seems wrong to you is right for him,
What is poison to one is honey to someone else...
It’s not me that is glorified in acts of worship.
It’s the worshippers! I don’t hear the words
they say. I look inside at the humility...
Moses, those who pay attention to ways of behaving

⁵³ Coleman Barks and John Moyne, *The Essence of Rumi* (Harper, 1995), p 32

and speaking are one sort.
Lovers who burn
are another...
Don't scold the lover.
The "wrong" way he talks is better than a hundred
"right" ways of others.
Inside the Kaaba
it doesn't matter which direction you point
your prayer rug!
The ocean diver doesn't need snowshoes!
The Love-Religion has no code or doctrine."⁵⁴

True believers regard every person and every belief as ultimately deriving from God. Far from rejecting and dissociating ourselves from other faiths and their symbols, we can form a true community:

When the school and the mosque and the minaret
get torn down, then the Sufis
can begin their community

Let me conclude with these beautiful words of Rumi

Zan suy-e harf-e dorst-o nadorost
Arsey-e didar beyn-e ma va tost.
Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I will meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about
language, ideas, even the phrase each other
doesn't make any sense.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Ibid, pp. 165-168
⁵⁵ Ibid, p 36