

IS THERE A CONCEPT OF MYSTICISM IN ISLAM

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Abstract

Mystical experiences and practices have been an integral part of most religions in the world. There has been an understanding amongst scholars, historians and people in general, that Islamic Sufism is a form of mysticism. An attempt has been made in this article to define what is 'altered state of Consciousness' with which mystical visions are seen by mystics. A survey of mystical practices of people following different religions and cultures has been undertaken to analyze these practices and experiences to ascertain how far these are reliable for the mystics themselves and to their followers. In doing so, we have challenged the assumption that Islamic Sufism is on par with mysticism and that Islam, just as every other religion, preaches mysticism and mystic practices.

Keywords: Mysticism, Sufism, Islam, magic, visions, consciousness, miracles.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to briefly describe mystic experiences of people, classify these experiences with reference to different religions / cultures / traditions to find out how far these are reliable to the Mystic himself, how far they are reliable in terms of 'illusion' and 'enlightenment' as described by the mystic, and how far they are reliable to general people in terms of the possible aims of the Mystic.

Mysticism is a collection of certain practices, dialogues, texts, traditions, rituals, beliefs, incantations, spells, chants and experiences aimed at transforming human perception about an intended or unintended thing.

Mysticism is related to an altered state of consciousness. To understand it, we need to know what is meant by consciousness in human beings. And for this purpose, we need to find out the functioning of human mind, heart and soul.

(i) Birth of a Human being

Philosophers, biologists, medical fraternity and scholars have been debating for a long time as to

when a human being becomes a *human being*? Some say, at the time of the birth, while others say, when the fetus is formed in the mother's womb. Some say when the brain/heart of the fetus starts to function, while others say when the egg is fertilized, it should be treated as a human being.

Aristotle said, *40 days* (from the time of fertilization) for *male*, and *90 days* for *female* is the time when the fetus becomes a human being.

Prophet Mohammad (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم) said, 'each one of you is constituted in the womb of the mother for forty days, then he becomes a clot of thick blood for a similar period and then a piece of flesh for a similar period (total 120 days). Then Allah sends an angel who breathes a soul into it'. (*Bukhari*). Meaning, when the soul gets associated with the formed child, we can call it a human being. Till then it is just a body of matter.

Modern scientific research has confirmed that baby's development takes place all the way from the conception (fertilization of egg) till the child is born. By the end of 4th month, the child's heartbeat is audible. Toes, fingers eyelids, eyebrows, eyelashes, nails and hairs are formed, and teeth and bones become denser. At the start of 5th month, the mother feels the movement of the child. When we calculate it in the number of days, it comes to 120 days.

The Quran describes the formation of a child as - '*And verily We (Allah) did create man from a quintessence (of clay). Then We placed him (as a drop of sperm) in a place of rest, firmly fixed. Then We made the sperm into a clot of congealed blood (zygote). Then of that clot We made a lump (fetus). Out of that lump, We made bones and clothed them with flesh. Out of it, we developed another creature (by breathing life into it). So, blessed be Allah, the most marvelous Creator. (Al-Mominoon - 12-14).*

(ii) Corporeal and Non-Corporeal faculties

Human inner self is non-corporeal or non-material in nature, whereas human body is made up of matter. Matter has weight, volume, dimensions and occupies space. It requires force to get into motion and requires force to stop. Matter, on its own does not have life or intention.

The human body has many internal and external organs. There are two major organs in a human body (i) *human biological brain* and (ii) *human biological heart*. These two organs work in close association with human inner-self's faculties of (i) *mind* and (ii) (*non-corporeal*) *heart*.

It is important to know the difference and relationship between human *non-corporeal mind* and *human biological brain*, and *human non-corporeal heart* and *human biological heart*. It is also important to know that both should work efficiently. Any deficiency in any of them, affects normal functioning of the human consciousness. For instance, a belief contrary to the fact of a thing, shows a deficiency in *non-corporeal mind*. Similarly, any kind of physical damage to the *biological brain* results in issues in cognitive ability.

(iii) How the information is processed in mind

It is an established scientific fact that the information coming from our senses, i.e., touch, sight, hearing, smell and taste, is transferred to our biological brain.

Take for instance, our sense of touch. Our skin has tiny nerve endings that send signals to the brain when stimulated. The brain, then sends a response accordingly. This kind of functioning, however, is different from perception, understanding and reasoning.

The human non-corporeal heart is, where the meanings or understanding resides, and the mind is where the reason is processed. This can be explained by an example. When someone sees a tiger, the mind processes its picture and concludes it to be a tiger. The heart draws its meaning, it is brave. The information preserved in our mind is 'tiger is brave'.

It is important to note that the mind does not get dominance over heart, rather it is the heart that often overrules the mind's conclusions and draws its own meanings.

The process of separating 'meanings' from outside 'picture' in non-corporeal mind (common sense) is known as 'the process of Incredulity (doubt)'. Why this process is called 'Incredulity'? Because drawing of meanings by individual men and women could be right or wrong, depending upon their knowledge or ignorance about facts of things. Like a person who looks at water, considers it to be a liquid used for drinking and other purposes. The Chemist knows it to be the chemical compound of Hydrogen and Oxygen H₂O. The philosopher understands, it is matter, in a liquid form.

Mysticism

(i) Wakeful consciousness

Wakefulness is a state of human non-corporeal mind or consciousness in which an individual is routinely engaged in cognitive and behavioral responses to the external world. In wakefulness, the information is coming from the external senses of the body to the brain and they are processed by non-corporeal mind. In the state of sleep, most external inputs to the brain are excluded.

(ii) Altered state of consciousness

Altered state of consciousness is a momentary change in mind's functioning which is distinctly different from its normal state of wakefulness.

Most people know that certain variations, like *elevated arousal*, in their everyday wakefulness is normal to them. This is known as *normal fluctuation*. Any state that differs significantly from it, is known as '*altered state of consciousness*'. For instance, a person can have an outer-sensory or supersensory perceptual experience while watching a tumultuous ocean, visualizing ships sinking or people dying. Sometimes a person may have inner-sensory or subsensory perceptual experience, like realizing the impermanence of all that exists. In this he

does not need to see something outside to realize it.

The classification of Altered State of Consciousness (ASC) are, (i) *Spontaneous*, like wakeful dreaming or near death experience (for lack of oxygen), (ii) *Psychological*, like hypnosis, Music, meditation, etc., (iii) *Pathological*, like epilepsy (neurological disorder), (iv) *Pharmacological*, like the effect of certain drugs, (v) *ergotropic*, like ecstasy, etc.

ASC could be multidimensional as it depends upon a person's psychological upbringing. ASC may also happen in dreams during deep sleep mode, *REM (rapid eye movement) mode*, etc.

Philosophers, Sages and seers from antiquity have been writing that the dimension we see with our physical eyes is not the only dimension of existence. Many other realms exist and within them a variety of beings, spirits, energies and entities exist. They call them elves (supernatural creatures), leprechauns (short, stocky humanlike creatures), devas, fairies, jinn, devils, ghosts, etc. Mystics attempt to have contact with these unseen forces. Shamanic practitioners allegedly communicate with the spirits of animals, ancestors and the plant world. Psychics, clairvoyants (who claim to have supernatural ability) and mediums (occults) conduct seances (magical spells in an attempt to contact the dead) to speak with entities from nonvisible realms. Religious mystics affirm the presence of angels, spirits, deities and other invisible beings.

In short, it is established that something mysterious is happening in dimensions other than those perceptible by our physical senses.

(iii) Mystical experiences in various religions

Mystical experiences also occur within the religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, etc. In these traditions, the experiences are allegedly of a supersensory reality, shape of a deity/god. In Buddhist traditions, they call it '*Nirvana*' (freedom from the cycle of births), as a reality. Sometimes it is claimed that they see flying Buddha.

In Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism, the state of *Samadhi* (deep concentration) is a state of meditative consciousness. In the yogic and Buddhist traditions, it is a *meditative absorption* or *trance*, (half consciousness as in the case of hypnosis) attained by the practice of *Dhyana* (profound meditation which is said to be the penultimate stage of yoga).

In the Christian mystic experience, they claim '*union with god*'. Some claim to see Jesus. In Hindu mystic experience, the yogi sees himself as *Brahman (Universe)* or sees one of the Hindu gods/deities appearing to speak with him. Some Hindus see '*moksha*' (release from karma). *Nirvanic enlightenment* (the state of awakening) experience is associated with Buddhism. Jains see *Kevalic enlightenment* (spiritual purity) associated with Jainism. Jewish Kabbalists experience the *Sefrah* (10 emanations of nothingness which are described by them by a diagram), and the Dualists experience the subject and god distinct without blurring of boundaries. Differences of object(s) depend upon the religious beliefs of the mystic which, in turn, make differences in content of the mystic experience.

There are some theistic and non-theistic mystical experiences as well. Theism is the belief in the existence of a Supreme god and associated divine beings. Opposite to it is Atheism, which is rejection of belief in god or gods. Agnosticism is the belief that any god / gods / deities existing are unknown.

Followers of perennialism claim that all world religions contain similar inner teaching in their sacred texts and that all religions are truthful. But, when we analyze the different mystic experiences of people belonging to different religions / cultures / beliefs, we realize that the perennialism theory is not based on facts. It is because, the mystic experiences are so varied, and their interpretations are so different that the common sense does not accept the religious texts and beliefs of all religions to be similar.

(iv) Mystics' claims

There are different faiths, different gods associated with similar works in different religions.

And the descriptions of the Mystics about their experiences is insulated with his/her religious beliefs and he/she interprets their experience in order to testify the truthfulness of his/her beliefs. In such a scenario, it is hard to consider these claims as logical.

(v) The supernatural phenomenon associated with mysticism

Those who practice mysticism show certain supernatural phenomena, as a yogi can live without food for days. Another mystic walks on fire. Some pierce metal rods into their skins and people see no blood coming out from their skin. Some are reported to walk on water. Some are reported to come out of their bodies, and some hold their breaths for unusually longer period. All these are seemingly not possible from the point of view of physical senses.

Acts that appear to be supernatural are undertaken by every Mystics who follow different religions in the world. With these mystical observations they claim truthfulness of their religions. Here again it is hard to consider these claims as reliable.

We work in gyms to develop our immune system with which we can keep safe from different diseases. Similarly, we train ourselves in martial arts to defend ourselves against enemies. The same looks to be the case with our consciousness. With certain practices like yoga, staying away from worldly comforts, fasting, meditation, etc., our non-corporeal faculties of mind and heart can be trained / developed with which it becomes easier to undertake supernatural tasks which are not possible by others. Since mystics in almost all religions perform supernatural tasks as a claim of truthfulness of their religions, it is difficult to accept these as related to the truthfulness of their beliefs because they are so varied in content.

Hypnosis is a glaring example in this context. A person who is the master of hypnosis, hypnotizes a person with which the hypnotized person becomes subjected to his commands. Hypnotism is also used for therapeutic purposes which is known as 'hypnotherapy'.

(vi) Spiritual possession and exorcism as a form of mysticism

In some religions, it is observed that some people, at the time of certain religious rituals, claim to get possessed by some spirits, gods. People witness that their voice, perception and knowledge changes which depicts another person. When we see that the person who gets possessed is not an actor or juggler, rather he/she is a normal human being who cannot behave like the way he/she behaves when possessed, it is obvious that the phenomena of spirits possessing certain human beings is a fact, though cannot be explained scientifically. People gathered around the possessed person during the rituals ask him certain questions and get answers which, in certain cases, come out to be logical, but the person possessed had no previous knowledge about it.

The concept of spiritual possession exists in many religions like Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Southeast Asian and African traditions, etc. A study was conducted in 1969, by Ohio State University which was funded by National Institute of Mental Health, US and it was found that it existed in 488 societies around the world. The possession was found to be voluntary and involuntary both, which had beneficial or detrimental effects on the host.

(vii) Magic and sorcery as a form of mysticism

Enchantment, Magic (using occult forces of evil / nature), necromancy (alleged communication with the dead), sorcery, witchcraft, etc., are used to produce results through mysterious influences. All these are used by the faith healers who call themselves Sufis. This practice is known as Mystical Sufism. Mystical Sufism is not part of Islam.

Truthfulness of a religion

Religions in the world are broadly divided into monotheistic and polytheistic. Polytheistic religions believe in different gods for different works in the Cosmos. Most of the polytheistic

religions are pantheistic and vice versa. Monotheistic religions believe in one Supreme God.

More or less, all religions in the world believe in one supreme God, however, polytheistic religions associate certain divine gods responsible for different works in the cosmos. Pantheists believe godhood inherent in every human being.

Understanding the Jewish and Christians beliefs also requires the reader to see these faiths more from a polytheistic point of view as Christians believe in trinity, the father god, the son of God and the holy ghost, all divine. Similarly, Judaism is not a strictly monotheistic religion as certain divine beings are believed to be the family of God who became angels. These beliefs are described in their holy books, Genesis 6 (ii & iv), Job 1 (vi), Job 2 (i), Job 38 (vii), Psalms 29 (i), Psalms 89 (vi) Psalms 82, and Daniel 3 (xxv). The book of Enoch describes Noah (Prophet Nooh عليه السلام) as the son of God.

Islam is the only religion in the world which believes in one Supreme God who is free from the considerations of shape, body, form, etc. There is no scope of divinity associated with anything other than Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) in Islam. Muslims believe that all Prophets, from Prophet Adam (عليه السلام) to Prophet Mohammed (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم), were human beings who preached the same message, oneness of God.

Islamic Sufism

The major sources about the beliefs of Islamic Sufis are the Quran, and the Prophet Mohammad's (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم) Sunnah. In Islam, there are three states of being a Muslim, (a) Iman, (b) Islam, and (c) Ihsan. These are briefly described below.

(a) *Iman* is to Belief in Allah. A Muslim must believe in Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) as the creator of this Cosmos and no one but He can be worshiped. Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) is free from the considerations of body, form, shape, etc. Everything in this cosmos is His creation. Allah's (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) creations are appearing in the cosmos in specific shapes / forms / characteristics as per their facts. In

addition, he must believe in Allah's angels, His Prophets, in His books, the day of Judgment, in destiny and fate, and that all virtue and evil is from Allah.

(b) *Islam* is to worship Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) alone and none else, to offer 5 times prayers perfectly, to pay the compulsory charity 'Zakat' to observe fasts during the month of Ramadan and perform Hajj once in a lifetime (provided you have the means). Thus, Islam is related with the deeds.

(c) *Ihsan* is to realize the presence of Allah in our daily lives. The state of Ihsan is known as Islamic Sufism. The Shuyookh of Ihsan or Sufi Shuyookh teach their pupils how to see/realize Allah in their lives in order to be good human beings for the sake of themselves and the society in general.

(i) Sufi training in Islam

Islamic Sufis train their followers / Murideen in spirituality or development of their non-corporeal faculties of mind and heart advising them to stay away from worldly passions and sinfulness. Sufi training should not be misunderstood with the theories of Mysticism in other religions. Islamic Sufis of Ihsan teach their pupils how to see/realize Allah in their lives in order to be good human beings for the sake of themselves and the society in general. Islamic Sufis take the assistance of Allah's (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) epithets, Quranic verses, supplications of Prophet Mohammad (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم), and supplications of Shuyookh of Ihsan in helping people in warding off evil from their lives. With these practices, their non-corporeal consciousness develops, with which they stay safe from the effects of evil spirits, hypnosis, enchantment, magic, occult forces of nature, sorcery, witchcraft, etc. It helps them to keep their faith in God intact and walk on the right path of Islam.

Conclusion

Most important aspect in Islam is to keep the Islamic faith intact and work strictly as per the Sharia established by Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) and His Apostle Mohammad (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم). There is nothing like Islamic Mysticism. Those who practice Mystic Sufism use occult practices

followed elsewhere. The spiritual training conducted by Islamic Sufis is to ward off evil from people so that their faith in Islamic teachings is not corrupted.

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