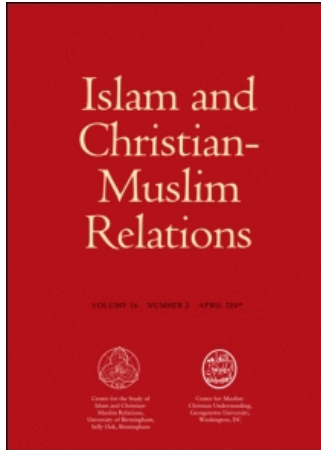


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Access Details: [subscription number 783016864]  
Publisher: Routledge  
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954  
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713424660>

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William C. Chittick

Online Publication Date: 01 October 2003

To cite this Article: Chittick, William C. (2003) 'The Pluralistic Vision of Persian Sufi Poetry', Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, 14:4, 423 — 428

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/0959641032000127579

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0959641032000127579>

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## The Pluralistic Vision of Persian Sufi Poetry

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WILLIAM C. CHITTICK

**ABSTRACT** *This article explains how the Sufi tradition was instrumental in molding the imagery, symbolism, metaphors, tropes, and indeed the worldview, that informs all but the earliest Persian poetry. This poetry expresses the precedence of mercy in a pluralistic vision by pointing to an expression of love, and it does this by the magic of beautiful language, enticing imagery and intoxicating rhythm. Therefore, in this tradition, love alone is able to bring together all contradictory and varied qualities and to reinstate them in God's unity, which is the first principle of Islamic faith. What is being celebrated is God's unitary reality. The article then recognizes that love is understood as the unifying divine power that is the unique prerogative of human beings, who alone were created in the full image of God.*

Upon hearing the words 'religious pluralism in Persia', many people familiar with Persian literature would no doubt react in much the same way as I did. I immediately thought of a well-known strophic poem (*tarji'-band*) by Hatif of Isfahan, a minor poet who died in 1783, at the beginning of the Qajar period. Like most of the later poets, Hatif has remained largely unknown and unread. However, his strophic poem has become rather famous. In five stanzas, for a total of about 90 verses, it celebrates the unity of God in the standard imagery of Sufism.

God's unity, which is the first principle of Islamic faith, may not strike most people as something to sing about. But the Persian language has a long poetical tradition of doing just that. What separates such poetry from theology is the extraordinarily vivid, evocative and beautiful language that is employed, a language that invariably focuses on love as the key to understanding.

Each of the five stanzas of Hatif's poem ends with a refrain that is half Persian and half Arabic: 'He is one and there is nothing but He—He alone, no god but He' (*ka yaki hast u hich nist juz u, wahdahu la ilaha illa hu*). An English translation of the whole poem is available in the fourth volume of E. G. Browne's classic study, *A Literary History of Persia*, which was first published in 1924. I could easily spend the rest of this essay summarizing the poem and explaining its imagery. However, this would not really help us understand why Persian poetry is precisely the place where one would expect to encounter such expressions of religious pluralism. Even though few poets have been as outspoken as Hatif on this issue, what he says fits perfectly into the tradition. I will come back to the poem, but I first need to address a few general issues that can help us understand why Hatif can be taken as a fair example of a general pluralistic vision in the poetical tradition.

Let me begin by saying something about the role of Sufism in Persian Islam. The term 'Sufism' has a complex and controversial history, and I cannot begin to do justice to it here. Scholars often try to simplify the task of defining the word by replacing it with

another word, such as ‘mysticism’, or ‘esoterism’, or ‘spirituality’. However, these words are just as much in need of definition as is ‘Sufism’ itself, so I prefer to keep a word that has an Arabic pedigree.

For the purposes of this discussion, I use the word ‘Sufism’ in the way that it has been understood by a large body of Muslims over the past 1000 years throughout the Islamic world, from Africa to China.<sup>1</sup> In this understanding, the Islamic tradition is like a walnut. Sufism is like the walnut’s kernel, and the ritual, legal and social teachings of Islam are like its husk. The kernel is the living essence, and the husk functions to protect and preserve the kernel. Without the kernel, the husk is hollow and worthless, and without the husk, the kernel cannot develop and mature. In this simile, the Sufi kernel is understood as a body of teachings and practices designed to help seekers of God experience the transformation of their own souls. The goal is conformity with the divine qualities that God instilled into human beings when he created them in his own image.

As for the relationship between Sufism and Persian poetry, we should first recall that over the past 1000 years, the Persian language has witnessed a host of major and minor poets, even though few of them have been translated into Western languages. Many if not most of these poets were either explicit representatives of the Sufi tradition, or implicit exponents of Sufi teachings. The simple reason for this is that the Sufi tradition was instrumental in molding the imagery, symbolism, metaphors, tropes, and indeed the worldview, that inform all but the earliest Persian poetry. If we can grasp the Sufi worldview, we can quickly understand two things: first, why it is that poetry is especially appropriate for the expression of Sufism; and, second, why a certain tendency toward religious pluralism is inherent in the Sufi perspective.

In the general Islamic view of things, the universe is understood as ‘everything other than God’. This includes not only physical things, but also spiritual things. According to the common Sufi image that has already been employed, the universe can be pictured as kernel and husk. The kernel represents the invisible realm, which is the domain of souls, spirits and angels; the husk represents the visible realm, which is the domain of sense perception and bodily things. The kernel is essentially light, life, knowledge and awareness; the husk is essentially darkness, death, ignorance and unconsciousness. The kernel is meaning, the husk is expression and form. The kernel is the domain of unity, sameness, coherence, peace and harmony; the husk is the domain of multiplicity, difference, incoherence, strife and disharmony.

If we look at the universe in relation to God, God is the kernel, and the universe is the husk. In other words, relative to God, both spirits and bodies are husks. But, if we look at the universe in relation to our own human embodiment, then the physical realm is the husk, the spiritual realm is the kernel, and God is the kernel of the kernel.

Human beings play a unique role in the economy of the cosmos, because they alone were created in God’s full image. Everything other than human beings is a partial image of God. In other words, other creatures are parts of the kernel, or parts of the husk. Human beings alone were created as equivalent to the whole nut, embracing both kernel and husk. As a result, only human beings have full access to the kernel of the kernel, or, as Rumi often calls this ultimate kernel, *jan-i jan*, ‘the spirit of the spirit’, or ‘the life or the life’.

In this way of looking at things, everything in the universe has a proper role to play, and human beings have the unique role of coordinating and harmonizing all of creation. But human beings cannot play their proper role by focusing their efforts on the domain of husks, because that would be a never-ending and impossible task. They can only live

up to human potential by devoting themselves here and now to the kernel. If they can find their own kernel and then move on to the kernel of the kernel, all things can be put in their proper places.

This bifurcation of religious attention has deep roots in God's creativity. After all, God created both kernel and husk, both spiritual and corporeal realms. Human beings have spirits and bodies. Both sides of the human person need to be nurtured and cultivated. God sent the prophets to act as guides in this bipolar development. The prophets brought practices, rituals, rules and regulations to keep the bodily, social and political domains healthy and whole; and they brought wisdom, insight and transforming grace to bring about the growth of the spirit. The various schools of Islamic teaching and practice focus on different dimensions of this task. Both theological dogma and social and ritual practices are concerned with protecting and strengthening the husk. In contrast, Sufi teachings focus on encouraging the growth of the kernel.

Given the bipolar nature of the universe and the human self, much of Islamic theology depicts God himself in bipolar terms.<sup>2</sup> As the Qur'ān puts it, God has 'two hands'. He is both merciful and wrathful, gentle and severe, majestic and beautiful, or, in more abstract terms, both transcendent and immanent. In the view of the Persian poets, the drama of human life is played out in the tension between the bipolar qualities of the universe, which manifest the simultaneous transcendence and immanence of God. The poets constantly sing about God's mercy and wrath, but they use the imagery of roses and thorns, day and night, spring and autumn, drunkenness and sobriety, union and separation, laughter and tears, sugar and vinegar.

Beyond the polarities, the poets find the reality of love. Love alone is able to bring together all contradictory qualities and to reinstate them in God's unity. The use of the word 'love' (*'ishq*) in preference to any other shows that this reinstatement can only be achieved by the transformation of the soul, not simply by theorizing and theologizing. Only love, among all human experiences, has the universality and open-endedness to suggest something of the nature of the ultimate transfiguration that is the goal of human life.

In short, God is both merciful and wrathful, both immanent and transcendent. His mercy is associated with kernels, roses, angels, daytime, union, spring, laughter and joy. His wrath is associated with husks, thorns, devils, night, separation, autumn, sobriety, tears and heartache. As for love, it welcomes whatever comes from God, whether roses or thorns. This helps explain why a poet like Rumi can celebrate separation and pain almost as much as he celebrates union and joy. Take for example his verses:

Pains are an alchemy that renews—  
 who can be bored when pain appears?  
 Beware, do not sigh coldly in boredom—  
 seek pain, seek pain, pain, pain!<sup>3</sup>

Although Sufi teachers acknowledge that God creates a universe in terms of his own bipolar attributes, they also recognize that the two poles are not equal. The simple reason for this is that the pole of mercy manifests the unitary nature of God's reality, whereas wrath comes into play only in terms of the multiplicity of creation. The dominant theological perspective of Sufism is exemplified in the inscription written on God's Throne: 'My mercy takes precedence over My wrath.' In other words, God's mercy, gentleness and compassion are more real and basic to the divine nature than wrath, severity and judgment. Mercy pertains to God's essential, unitary Self, but wrath comes into play only after distinctions are made among God's diverse names and

attributes. Unity will triumph over the multiplicity, and mercy will have the final say. Wrath can only be a passing phenomenon, contingent upon difference, separation and ignorance.

If we look at God and the universe together, then God, who is the kernel of the kernel, is pure mercy, because mercy is the essential description of God's unitary self. In contrast, the universe, which is multiple, is a domain of mercy mixed with wrath. Within the universe, the kernel is closely allied with mercy, and the husk is closely bound up with the manifestation of wrath. Of course, there is also plenty of mercy in the husk, but only in the husk does wrath play a significant role, because the husk is the realm of bipolarity, multiplicity, difference, differentiation, conflict and strife.

No one can find the kernel, which is the realm of peace, harmony, wholeness and mercy, without taking the husk into account. This means that God's wrath and severity have real manifestations in human lives. For the sake of prudence and caution, it is best to ignore the fact that God's mercy takes precedence over his wrath, because we cannot know how long it will take for mercy to show its full effects. What we do know is that we live in a world of strife and difference, and we are constantly being forced to make choices. It is important to make the right choices, and to do so we need clear instructions and explicit differentiations based upon divine guidance, which is embodied in the prophets and their messages.

Many of the Sufi authorities were extremely concerned with the husk—make no mistake about that. There are numerous prose treatises written by Sufis detailing the difference between right and wrong activity and explaining the necessity of distinguishing between true and false teachings. People can adhere to the divine image latent in their own souls only if they discern between truth and falsehood, observe ritual obligations and follow ethical guidance. Nonetheless, when the Sufis wrote poetry, they employed it mainly to do what it does best, and that is to sing and to celebrate. What is being celebrated is God's unitary reality, which demands the precedence of mercy. Love is then understood as a unifying divine power that is the unique prerogative of human beings, who alone were created in the full image of God.

The poets frequently remind us that love cannot be explained, only experienced. We all know this—at least all of us who have been in love. Theologically, part of the reason for this is that love pertains to the kernel of the kernel. Love is the experience of the realm of unity, mercy, sameness and union. The Sufis sometimes call this experience 'drunkenness' and 'intoxication' because it results in the domination of the perception of sameness and divine immanence over difference and transcendence. Distinctions among things are effaced because God is seen to be present in everything. Nonetheless, intoxication is not appropriate for the realm of husks, because here sobriety is the norm, and sobriety demands explanation and rational articulation, for which prose is the ideal vehicle. Poetry, in contrast does not 'explain', it points. It expresses the precedence of mercy by evoking an experience and calling forth love, and it does this by the magic of beautiful language, enticing imagery and intoxicating rhythm.

Sufi poetry, then, is a celebration of love, a hymn to unity and union, a song of rejoicing that invites the listener to taste the eternal wine. It is the place not for making divisions, but rather for reveling in the universal presence of God. Rational categories split hairs, but poetry celebrates the Beloved's flowing tresses in all their beauty and splendor. To the extent that the poets address issues of religious pluralism, they do so within the context of the comprehensive divine mercy that invites all creatures to return to the kernel of the kernel.

This does not mean that the Sufi poets were nice, liberal, tolerant pluralists in any

modern sense. They celebrated the unity of the kernel without forgetting the differentiation and conflict that pertain to the husk. They were fully aware that no one can possess the kernel unless the husk is treated in the proper manner. They knew that this demanded following the divine guidance as embodied in the prophets. For them, there was no contradiction between pluralism and exclusivism. Pluralism pertains to the kernel and the realm of intoxication, and exclusivism pertains to the husk and sobriety. Sufi pluralism recognized the unity of all humanity in God's creative act, and it acknowledged the unanimity of all the prophets in God's guidance. But Sufi exclusivism meant that the teachers and poets recognized significant differences in the domain of husks. In practice, they were Muslims like other Muslims. They had the standard qur'ānic preconceptions about other religions. In no sense did they think the husk was indifferent, or that all husks are equal. They were certain of the superiority of their own husk because it had allowed them to find the kernel of the kernel.

At the same time, the Sufi poets were completely aware that the divine mercy and forgiveness take precedence over wrath and punishment, that God knows and that we do not know, and that there is no possible way to make final judgments about anyone. Final judgment belongs only to God, and he judges in his own good time and according to his standards, not ours. The only thing we can be absolutely sure about is God's unity and the precedence of his mercy.

Let me come back to Hatif, the poet with whom I began. His five-stanza poem is a perfect exemplar of the Sufi worldview that I have just described. The second stanza addresses the issue of religious pluralism rather explicitly. He uses the example of Christianity, but he clearly has in mind the same principle that Rumi expresses in his well-known line, 'It is from the viewpoint, O marrow of existence, that disagreements arise among Muslim, Zoroastrian, and Jew':<sup>4</sup>

With You, O Friend, I will never break my bond,  
    though they cut me with sword, limb from limb.  
In truth, a hundred lives would be cheap  
    if You were to give me half a sugar-smile.  
Father, don't give me advice in love—  
    this child will not be tamed.  
People should give advice instead  
    to those who advise me about Your love.  
I know the way to the road of safety,  
    but what can I do? I've been taken by the snare.  
In church, I said to that Christian heart-thief,  
    'O you who have caught my heart in your trap,  
O you to the threads of whose sacred belt  
    each hair of mine is singly tied,  
Until when will you fail to find the road of unity?  
    Until when will you place the shame of Trinity on the One?  
How can you call the One God  
    "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost"?'  
She parted her sweet lips and said to me,  
    while candy fell from her sugar-smile,  
'If you are aware of Unity's secret,  
    do not accuse us of unbelief.  
In three mirrors the eternal Beloved

threw the rays of his shining face.  
 “Silk” does not become three  
 if you call it *parniyan*, *harir*, and *parand*.<sup>7</sup>  
 We were having this talk when from the side,  
 the church bell rang out in song,  
 ‘He is one, and there is nothing but He,  
 He alone, no god but He.’

## NOTES

1. See William Chittick, *Sufism: a short introduction* (Oxford, Oneworld, 2000). Modern-day Iranians often hold the view that Sufism is an Iranian invention. This view, however, has much more to do with nationalism than with the actual situation. As many scholars have shown, Sufism originates in the Qur’ān and the Sunna of the Prophet, just as do the other branches of Islamic learning and practice. Like the other branches of the Islamic tradition, Sufism accompanied the religion wherever it spread, not only to Persia. Another common opinion is that Sufism has nothing to do with Islam. This idea first became prevalent in the late nineteenth century among reformers and modernists, who singled out Sufism as the cause of the backwardness of Islamic countries. These two opinions have produced a curious alliance between political activists and expatriate Iranians. The activists claim that Sufism is a foreign borrowing or a decadence, and the Iranians agree that Sufism has nothing to do with Islam. However, in the Iranian view, Islam is Arab fanaticism, and Sufism is a wonderful, gentle, universalistic, non-dogmatic way of life and thought that expresses the true spirit of Persian civilization.
2. Any discussion of bipolar concepts in Persian Islam invariably brings up the issue of the ‘influence’ of pre-Islamic Iranian dualism on the Islamic period. Those modern-day Iranians who are inclined to see Sufism as a Persian reaction to Islam are quick to seize on the prevalence of such ideas in Sufi poetry as proof of pre-Islamic influence. However, there is little historical evidence to support their opinion. First, to say that there was ‘influence’ is really not to say anything. In the literal sense of the term, the fact of influence is self-evident, because everyone knows that pre-Islamic Persia gradually became Islamic Persia, and that the eighth century inexorably followed upon the seventh century. But what exactly does this tell us? ‘Influence’ is a notoriously vague idea, and before it can function as a meaningful historical category, it needs careful definition and qualification. The word is typically employed not with evidence in mind, but rather with polemical intent. To say that Persian influence caused ‘dualistic’ ideas to appear in Sufism is really to say that Sufi ideas are Persian, not Islamic, so Sufism has little to do with Islam. Second, ‘duality’ in the sense of bipolarity or complementarity is practically universal in pre-modern cultures. It certainly was present not only in ancient Persia, but also in Greece, India and, as everyone knows, China. And third, the Qur’ān is full of verses that use bipolar language, a fact upon which Muslim thinkers of the past often remarked. The net result is that bipolarity is commonly found as a principle of Islamic theological thinking, without regard to geographical region. See Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam* (Albany NY, State University of New York Press, 1992).
3. *The Mathnawi of Jalalu’d-din Rumi*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (various editions), book 6, verses 4303–4.
4. *Ibid.*, book 3, verse 1258.