

Mystical Experience and its Critique of Pure Reason in the Spiritual Epistemology of Sūhrawardī and Rūmī

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Introduction

Though you believe in the accuracy of the scholastic knowledge,
it will not open your inner eyes to invisible existence.¹
Rūmī

This paper aims to introduce and discuss some preliminary aspects of mystical experience by examining the specific methodologies proposed by two celebrated figures of twelfth and thirteenth century Persian Sūfism, Shihab al-Dīn Yahyā al-Sūhrawardī and Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī. It will focus on their critical exposition of 'inner' knowledge as opposed to knowledge by pure reason. The learned scholar and philosopher mystic of Persian descent, Sūhrawardī, sought to unify scholarly differences and to identify one common trajectory of wisdom from which both the Greek and the Persian were descended. While making a clear break from the Peripatetics and philosophers of reason before him, he expounded upon the importance and primacy of direct mystical experience as the only means through which one may transcend the object/subject divide. Following the short life of Sūhrawardī, the great Persian mystic and poet, Rūmī, brought with him a continuation of the idea of religious unity and the belief that direct mystical experience takes precedence over and above reasoning alone. His monumental work, the *Mathnawī* represents the culmination of Sūfī experience and wisdom and is a landmark work for later Sūfīs in its expression of the heights of mystical knowledge. The central focus on unity of being, which comes to its theoretical fulfillment in Ibn Arabī, sits at the heart of the legacy of these two masters. Addressing the dilemmas of the

¹ Jalāl al-Dīn Muhammad Balkhī, *Mathnawī*, a critical edition by Muhammad Este'lami, 6 volumes, Tehran, 1991, MVI /263. In subsequent citations 'M' refers to the published text and Roman numerals referring to the book.

diversity of thought and the ultimate aim of spiritual union and fulfillment of being, it has particular importance for the tradition of Persian Sūfism.

On the subject of knowledge, this paper will discuss two forms of 'knowing' that are peculiar to the phenomenon of religion: 'inner or hidden knowledge' as opposed to 'apparent knowledge.' In the Sūfī tradition these two forms of knowledge are referred to, respectively, as *'ilm al-bātin* and *'ilm al-zāhir*. The term *bātin*, refers to that which is at the base or the inner core or the very heart of things, and *zāhir* simply indicates that which is, or appears to be transparent.

It is necessary to first clarify the terminology used to express inner knowledge: in particular, the terms 'gnosis' and 'esoteric' have caused much debate in the scholarly world concerning their application and meaning.² In terms of a practical mysticism, the term 'esoteric' represents hidden and protected knowledge that requires a level of initiation and guided intuition; it is not subject to normative means of learning. The term 'gnosis,' then, refers to experiential knowledge and the realisation of the truth, which otherwise remains hidden or esoteric. Gnosis is sacred because it refers to the highest realization of one's existence.

It is also important to clarify what 'knowledge' or 'truth' is being discussed. There are many forms of knowledge. Secondly, the terms 'esoteric' and 'gnosis' can be used interchangeably to imply any form of privileged knowledge. For example, a simple feat of carpentry demonstrates the very complexities of the nature of esotericism and of knowledge. The building of common household furniture is not as simple as it appears, especially if one has no knowledge of carpentry. Even for the apprentice carpenter, theoretical knowledge of carpentry is put to the test

² See Antoine Faivre, 'Quotations of Terminology Proper to the Study of Esoteric Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe,' and Wouter J Hanegraaff, 'On the Construction of 'Esoteric Traditions,'" in *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion*, A Faivre and W J Hanegraaff, editors, Belgium, 1998, 1-10 and 11-61.

against the realities of the 'practice of carpentry.' Many mistakes are made before the art is mastered and the desired article produced professionally. In any case, the type of knowledge that the esoteric represents (or protects) is 'experiential knowledge,' or 'knowledge by experience.' The possessor of gnosis is, in this instance, one who is by necessity a practitioner *par excellence* of a certain discipline. In other words, gnosis cannot be achieved in theory, but only through strict observance of the principles and disciplines of the way or method of one's practice.

A core premise in Islāmic theology maintains that 'certainty' is the condition of true knowledge and proper insight is only gained by way of three specific and necessary stages. It is believed that before one can achieve true knowledge one first needs to follow a strict discipline of practice. This is called '*Ilm al-Yaqeen* or the 'certainty of practice.' After this, one will arrive at a proper vision or clarity of thought, a stage referred to as *Ayn al-Yaqeen* or the 'certainty of seeing.' The final stage is defined by experience, this is called *Haqq al-Yaqeen* or the 'certainty of truth.' It is from these basic principles that the two main figures under discussion expound upon their mystical vision and epistemology. Shihab al-Dīn Yahyā b. Habāsh b. Amirak, Abu'l-Fūtūh al-Sūhrawardī (1154-1191) and Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Mohammed Balkhī- i Rūmī (1207-1273) have written extensively on the concept of experiential knowledge, though via different methodological avenues.

A brief overview of Sūhrawardī and Rūmī in a Sūfī context

Sūhrawardī and Rūmī both fall into the period of Sūfism that is characterised by its speculative drive and by a preoccupation with the attributes of gnosis and love. Each figure is further defined by distinct methodological approaches to Sūfism. Where Sūhrawardī would typically fall into the rational or philosophical realm and is, therefore, obviously an advocate of gnosis, Rūmī focuses on the principal of love through the realm of poetry. These are, however, technical, scholarly distinctions and both

Sūhrawardī and Rūmī transcend their own methodology in their appeal to spirituality and the true heart of Sūfīsm. In short, the way or method, for these two figures, is only the means to the Truth, after which naught but the Truth itself remains without any trace of the seeker (as idealised within the concept of *fanā*).

A primary teaching that pervades Sūfīsm is the constant warning of the individual regarding trap/s (and demands) of the *nafs*.³ The entire depth and breadth of Sūfī spirituality is encapsulated in this fundamental precept and expressed in a variety of ways by Sūfī masters through the ages. This teaching is comprised of two doctrinal components that form the basis of Sūfī practice: self-examination (*mohāsebeh*) as formally instigated by al-Mohāsibī (d.857) and chivalry (*javānmardī*)⁴ a rich tradition given particular spiritual impetus as a result of the rise of Islām. Sūfīsm, which was from its inception motivated by love (*eshq*) for Absolute Being (*Allāh*, *Haqq*, *Hū*) crystallised into two living traditions of thought: the school of Baghdad (sobriety) and the school of Khorāsān (drunkenness). The latter is the dominant form of

³ Expressed in psychoanalytical terminology as the 'ego,' it is more accurate to understand the term to imply the 'base self.' However, the concept does not, in the Sūfī paradigm, denote something that is entirely a component of evil nor is it necessarily associated with matter as its source. Two notions that help us deal with the complexities of the principle of the *nafs* are in a sense 'corruption' (of the soul) and 'forgetfulness' (of its divine origin). The idea of the *nafs* and its various stages is based on the *Qūr'an* and is expounded upon by Sūfī masters explaining the progressive stages of the 'soul' (*ar-ruh*) with which the term *nafs* is often exchangeable with. For the outline of the stages of the *nafs* see Annemarie Schimmel, 'Islām,' in *Historia Religionum*, C J Bleeker and G Widengren, editors, Leiden, 1971, 180; and J Nurbakhsh, *Sūfī Psychology*, London, 1983, 51-59.

⁴ *Javaanmardi* or 'spiritual chivalry' as it is better translated (which overlaps somewhat with the practice of *ādāb*), is the adherence to a set of ethical codes by the individual that make up the core discipline of Sūfī practice, in this instance. For an extensive discourse on the history and practice of *Javaanmardi* see Karim Zayyani, 'Javaanmardi dar aayne-ye tasawwuf,' in *Sūfī*, Issue 50, March, London, 2001, 26-37; also see introduction to Hussayn Wa'iz Kashifi Sabziwari, *Futuwat Namah-Yi Sultani*, translated by J R Crook, Chicago, 2000, xxi-xxxi.

Persian Sūfism and upholds the importance of *ādāb*⁵ over and above asceticism (*zūhd*).

These various practical Sūfī doctrines often subtly overlap each other. However, Sūfism traditionally quotes a particular *Hadīth* of the Prophet, as an exemplar, in which the aim of Sūfism is concisely defined: *man 'ārafa nafsahū faqad 'ārafa Rabbahū* ['he who knows his own self, knows his Lord'].⁶ This paper will mainly focus upon the notion of *mohāsebeh* and begin to clarify this idea and discuss in greater detail the structure and meaning of the methodologies of Sūhrawardī and Rūmī in light of the doctrine of self-knowledge.

A point of departure in methodological approaches toward a hermeneutics of esotericism and the phenomenology of religion

The 'hermeneutics of esotericism' is a methodological approach to the study of religion that aims to interpret esoteric texts, and their concepts, theories and principles on their own terms. Its primary concern is to treat 'world religions' not simply as a subject of social scientific research, but, as Eliade has put it, as hierophany (that is, manifestation of the sacred).⁷ The basic premise underlying this approach is the claim that religious texts and practices share a common core that is only separated methodically and socio-culturally in shaping individual ontological styles. As important as social science may be to the study of religion, an understanding of the nature of world religions, and especially their esoteric content, is predicated upon methodological approaches that look beyond methods which

⁵ According to the *Tāj al-'arūs*, a classical Arabic dictionary, *adab* (the singular of *ādāb*) is the 'learning of the exercises of the carnal soul (*nafs*), the betterment of morals.' See G S Reynolds, 'The Sūfī Approach to Food: A Case Study of Ādāb,' *The Muslim World*, Hartford, 2000, Vol 90, 199.

⁶ Hadīth Qudsi.

⁷ See Mircea Eliade and Lawrence E Sullivan, 'Hierophany,' in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. New York, 1987, 313-15.

focus only on social and cultural layers. Interpretation of texts and practices becomes central for a 'hermeneutics of esotericism'; these elements act as a window to the definitive centre and essential being of a particular tradition.

In light of this, there exists a great need for further scholarly appreciation of esoteric and mystical material as both the product and trigger of 'hierophanic experience.' Firstly, it is important to take note of Oldmeadow's comment that 'religious phenomena must be treated *sui generis* and not rammed into the theoretical straitjackets of reductionistic models of religion.'⁸ Secondly, as Oldmeadow points out in connection with Eliade, it is essential to:

try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it – the element of the sacred.⁹

For instance, the performative and transformative character of a particular text remains inextricable from the 'sacred' understanding and connection that a particular 'religious consciousness' has with the said text. Examining such phenomena is the task of the 'esoter[ic]ist' of religion; and moreover, as I have asserted, by means of a 'hermeneutics of esotericism' that heads toward a phenomenology of [comparative] 'esotericism' 'gnosticism' and 'mysticism.'

Of course, this is not new. What I phrase 'hermeneutics of esotericism' is implicit and innate to the methodologies of Nicholson,¹⁰ Arberry,¹¹ Corbin,¹² Massignon,¹³ and Schimmel¹⁴ to

⁸ Harry Oldmeadow, 'Debating Orientalism,' *Australian Religion Studies Review*, Vol 18.2, November 2005, 144.

⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, New York, 1958, xiii.

¹⁰ R A Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, Cambridge, 1921.

¹¹ A J Arberry, *The Doctrine of the Sufis. Kitab al-ta'arruf li-madhhab ahl al-tasawwuf*, Lahore, 1966.

¹² Henry Corbin, *Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, New York, 1978.

name but a few of the leading European specialists in Oriental scholarship who have opened up the avenues of learning and infinite possibilities of textual appreciation of the sacred content of mystical material of the East to the West. These gave rise to a revival of Western Esotericism of which the current exponents are Hanegraaff and Faivre.¹⁵ Esoteric knowledge of this kind continues to attract more serious attention in the East where the tradition is continued by the prolific scholars of the *philosophia perennis* and pre-eminent exponents of the traditionalist school such as Guenon,¹⁶ Schuon, Coomaraswamy, Suzuki, Ling, and Nasr.¹⁷ Although critiqued for their attack on the modernist position and for maintaining an elitist ambiance, their work remains an essential source for understanding the sacred.

The Traditionalists, along with Eliade (who belongs to the Eranos School) and the above-mentioned Orientalists have played a vital role in the building the methodological approach to the study of 'the sacred' within religion found in this paper. Their work is indispensable, for instance, in interpreting key themes that feature within and also define the *Mathnawī* of Rūmī and the 'Illuminationist Wisdom' of Sūhrawardī. Both Sūhrawardī and Rūmī are axial points in Sūfī learning and history, and were important innovators in terms of methodological approach for the didactic tradition of mystical literature. The methodological

¹³ Louis Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallaj: mystic and martyr of Islam*, Princeton, 1982.

¹⁴ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill, 1975.

¹⁵ For an introduction to their work see Faivre and Hanegraaff, op cit.

¹⁶ There is a need for further clarity concerning Guenon's position among the 'Traditionalists,' which will not be pursued here as it is beyond the scope of this paper. Briefly, although he was the first to publicly articulate the Traditionalist perspective and he is also associated with the school of thought through his earliest writings, key positions in Guenon's thought as indicated by Trompf beg the question of his correct association with the school. See G W Trompf, 'Macrohistory in Blavatski, Steiner and Guenon,' in *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion*, op cit, 294-5; Oldmeadow, op cit, 145.

¹⁷ For a good introduction to the Traditionalists and the idea of perennial philosophy see Harry Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism*, Colombo, 2000, and Jacob Needleman, *The Sword of Gnosis*, Baltimore, 1974.

approaches to comparative religion found with this paper are also indebted to these two great figures in Sufi thought.

Sūhrawardī

Opinions on Sūhrawardī vary between those who are strict admirers of his philosophical and scientific genius, and those who maintain the importance of his mystical or ‘allegorical’ treatises. The ‘Master of Illumination’ (*Sheikh al-Ishrāq*) as he is called, was the founder of an independent, non-Aristotelian school of philosophy named ‘the Philosophy of Illumination.’ He was born in the small town of Sūhraward in Persia 550/1154¹⁸ and met with a violent death by execution in Aleppo in the year 587/1191 as a result of his increasing involvement in politics. However, during his relatively short life he managed to produce over fifty works, many of which remain unpublished. Sūhrawardī was educated in Persia under eminent masters of theology and philosophy and moved to Syria (Aleppo) where he tutored a number of late sixth/twelfth century rulers to whom he taught his controversial ‘Illuminationist political doctrine.’ Notable among them were Seljūk Sulaymān Shāh, who commissioned a number of Sūhrawardī’s works, and the son of the Ayyūbid Salāh al-Dīn (famously known as Salāddīn), the young prince al-Mālik al-Zāhir Ghāzī, the governor of Aleppo under whom Sūhrawardī met his death.

Sūhrawardī’s deep appreciation of Aristotle lead him to a ‘re-thinking’ of Arabic Aristotelianism. He was critical of what he saw as the endless inconsistencies and ambiguities of Aristotle who, Sūhrawardī felt, never clearly demonstrated his theory of intuitive knowledge nor ever systematically presented what constitutes the ‘intuitive mode.’ His concern with intuitive knowledge was not limited to the Greek sphere alone. Sūhrawardī was an advocate of what he called ‘ancient wisdom’ (*Hikmat al-‘atīq*), which was able to reveal the truth that remains at the heart of all divinely

¹⁸ Respectively Arabic and Christian dating.

revealed religions.¹⁹ Sūhrawardī attempted to bridge the gap between Islām and the pre-Islāmic philosophies of hermeticism, Pythagoreanism, neo-Platonism, and, in particular, between Islām and the wisdom of the ancient Persians.²⁰ Sūhrawardī lived at a time when there was a need to re-unify the Islāmic sciences and to synthesise the myriad, contradictory schools of thought. Thus, his greatest contribution lay in his efforts to introduce an all-encompassing theory of knowledge that operated in parallel with his critique of the Peripatetics.

Sūhrawardī's underlying belief that philosophical discourse is a necessary part of one's spiritual path is unique. This was revolutionary in light of the Sūfīs' traditional rejection of rationalistic philosophy and the Peripatetics similar rejection of Sūfism. More precisely, Sūhrawardī aimed to harmonise intuitive knowledge (*al-hikma al-dhawqiyya*) with deductive knowledge (*al-hikma al-bahthiyya*).²¹ He does this by formulating his unified epistemological theory, which he called 'Knowledge by Presence' (*'ilm al-hūdūr*). This theory became his key method for arguing in favour of synthesising the diverse schools of thought and unifying them into a single philosophical paradigm.²² Although philosophy occupied a privileged position in Sūhrawardī's method, it has to be said that his entire methodology was informed, first and foremost, by the mystical experience. Therefore, his works can be divided into two categories: his philosophical epistemology and, more

¹⁹ Mehdi Aminrazavi, 'The Significance of Sūhrawardī's Persian Sūfī Writings in the Philosophy of Illumination,' in Leonard Lewisohn, editor, *The Heritage of Sūfism: Classical Persian Sūfism from its Origins to Rūmī (700-1300)*, Oxford, Vol 1, 1999, 260.

²⁰ Ibid. See also Henry Corbin, *Les motifs Zoroastriens dans la philosophie de Sohrawardi*, Tehran, Vol 3, 1946 and *Spiritual body and celestial earth: from Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran*, translated by Nancy Pearson, London, 1990.

²¹ Hossein Ziai, 'al-Sūhrawardī,' in *The Encyclopaedia of Islām*, Vol 9, Leiden, 1995, 782b.

²² Mehdi Ha'iri Yazdi, *The Principles of Epistemology in Islāmic Philosophy: Knowledge by Presence*, New York, 1992, 43ff.

importantly, his *ishrāqī* (or theosophical) epistemology.²³ Sūhrawardī argued that philosophical epistemology of various modes and schools inevitably suffers from one major shortcoming: while they have their uses, philosophically based epistemological models (including his own) fall short of attaining *certainty*. Therefore, the rationalistic aspect of his theory of knowledge is important largely to the extent that his philosophical epistemology can be seen as an extended, supplementary commentary to his *ishrāqī* and esoteric works.²⁴

This is clarified in Sūhrawardī's *ishrāqī* principles. 'Certainty' is a product of experiential knowledge and experiential knowledge is based on knowing ourselves. For Sūhrawardī this is the underlying axiom upon which cognition takes place and also what he believed the Peripatetics had previously ignored.²⁵ This special mode of cognition, which he calls 'Knowledge by Presence,' attains knowledge directly and without mediation, going beyond the traditional subject/object divide.²⁶

The first stage of his *ishrāqī* epistemology, in essence, argues that there is an unconditional and unchangeable self that defines what individuals refer to as the 'I' but is also commonly misunderstood for the attributes that are conceptually or accidentally attached to it. Next Sūhrawardī explains that

²³ For an extended discussion on this subject see Amirnazavi, op cit, 267-269.

²⁴ This hypothesis is strongly supported by Amirnazavi and contrasts the sole emphasis placed on Sūhrawardī's philosophical works by Ha'iri and Ziai. See Amirnazavi, loc. cit. It is argued by scholars Ha'iri and Ziai that Sūhrawardī's philosophical works can be said to stand alone depending on the degree to which they are successful in offering 'enlightenment' to the adept via intellectual means. Sūhrawardī does not deny this as being possible. See Hossein Ziai, *Knowledge by Illumination*, Atlanta, 1990; Ha'iri, op cit.

²⁵ Amirnazavi, op cit, 265. On Sūhrawardī and the Greek tradition see John Walbridge, *The Leaven of the Ancients: Sūhrawardī and the Heritage of the Greeks*, New York, 2000. The tradition of self-knowledge extends back to the time of the Pre-Socratics, which carries through in Socrates and Plato. Sūhrawardī acknowledges that there is a break at Aristotle, but mostly argues that this is because the latter's work has been largely misunderstood.

²⁶ Amirnazavi, op cit, 265-6

whereas proving the metaphysical self requires philosophical arguments, the attributes of the self (that are made up of worldly desires) are easy to identify.²⁷ He addresses this matter in some detail in his Sūfī writings.

The second stage consists of the self revealing itself through a process of 'unveiling.' For this, Sūhrawardī prescribes some ascetic practices as helpful for attaining mastery over the individual ego and for allowing its false attributes to vanish one by one. Throughout this process the self, whose relationship to its attributes is likened to that of the accidental qualities of sugar (that is, its whiteness, and so on) to sweetness, begins to reveal its 'I-ness.'²⁸

When you have made a careful inquiry into yourself you will find out that you are made of 'yourself' which is nothing but that which knows its own reality. This is your own 'I-ness' (*ana'iyyatuka*). This is the manner in which everyone is to know himself and in which everyone's 'I-ness' is common with you.²⁹

This constitutes the principle foundation for a theoretical understanding of Unity of Being (*wahdat al-wājūd*), wherein individuals are united in one common reality, that is, their 'I-ness': though it is Rūmī who later takes this beyond its theoretical bounds in the ecstatic quotation, 'there is no room in this house for two I's.'³⁰ Sūhrawardī no doubt understood this, but saw the essential role of philosophy as a useful tool for the *realization* of the 'I' and the fact that it is *separate* from its attributes. Sufi practices and ascetic techniques were then to be incorporated for the task of *destroying* the accidental qualities

²⁷ Ibid, 266.

²⁸ Ibid, 267.

²⁹ Ibid, source: Al- Sūhrawardī, Umar, *Œuvres philosophiques et mystiques*, Vol 1, Tehran + Paris, Bibliothèque Iranienne, 1331/1952, Opera Metaphysica et Mystica II, 112.

³⁰ Nicholson, *The Mathnawī of Jalālu'ddīn Rūmī*, Vol I, London, 2001, 167.

(such as worldly desires) and in finally achieving *annihilation* (*fana*).³¹

It is in this regard that Sūhrawardī's *ishrāqī* doctrine offered the synthesis between discursive philosophy, intellectual intuition and practical wisdom. His theosophical epistemology is further elaborated in seven short treatises known as his Persian Sūfī writings. These are: *Risālā al-Tayr* ('The Treatise of the Birds'), *Awāz-i Par-i Jibrāil* ('The Chant of Gabriel's Wing'), *Aql-i Surkh* ('The Red Intellect'), *Ruzi Ba Jamī'at-i Sūfīyyan* ('A Day Among the Community of Sūfīs'), *Risāla fi Hālāt al-Tufuliyya* ('Treatise on the State of Childhood'), *Risālā fi Haqīqat al-'Ishq* ('Treatise on the Reality of Love'), and *Lughat-i Murān* ('The Language of the Termites').³²

These remain central works through which the heart of his Illuminationist Wisdom (*Hikmat al-ishraq*) is understood. Sūhrawardī confesses to this point in the introduction to his *Hikmat al-ishrāq*:

The truth and the content of that [*Hikmat al-Ishrāq*] for me was not realized through intellection but through a separate means. Finally, having realized their truths [through illumination], I then sought to find their rational justification, however, in such a fashion that even were I to ignore [the rational basis of] these demonstrated propositions, no skeptic could ever cause me to fall into doubt concerning the truth of these things.³³

Sūhrawardī's philosophical discourse arises from the need to explain the 'certainty' of spiritual experience in a rational and systematical fashion: he was by profession an adept philosopher and scholar.

³¹ Amirnazavi, op cit, 267.

³² A brief synopsis of these has been offered by Amirnazavi in his article, op cit, 271-83. For their translation see W M Thackson, *The Mystical and Visionary Treatises of Shihabuddīn Yahyā Sūhrawardī*, London, 1982.

³³ Amirnazavi, source: Al- Sūhrawardī, *Hikmat al-ishraq*, translated by Sayyid Ja 'far Sajjadi, Tehran, 1978, 18.

Rūmī

The Persian poet, Rumi, was founder of the *Mawlawiyya* (or Mevlevi) order, known in the West as ‘the Whirling Dervishes,’ because of his reputation for suddenly falling into a romantic trance and whirling in the middle of the marketplace while reciting poetic verses. It was at the behest of his beloved student Hosamoddīn Chalabi (himself the head of an order of chivalry)³⁴ that the *Mathnawī*, Rūmī’s celebrated and most treasured work, was written down in order to collect the spiritual couplets that he would otherwise randomly recite. Of course, all of this was due to Rūmī’s ‘falling in love’ with the legendary ‘wandering dervish,’ Shams-i Tabrizi, who is celebrated in Sūfism as a great mystic with somewhat miraculous abilities. Before his meeting with Shams-i, Rūmī was already at the head of his father’s Sūfī school. After migrating from Balkh (in modern day Afghanistan), where Rūmī was born in the year 604/1207, his father (Bahā Valād) established his school at Konya at the request of the Seljuk Prince when Rūmī was still very young.³⁵ After his father’s death, he completed his education in all the traditional Islāmic sciences including theology, jurisprudence, prophetic traditions, Islāmic philosophy and literature under the eldest member of the school.

It was at the height of his career as a well-respected scholar that Shams-i entered his life. The famed exchange that took place between them is recited by Sūfī tradition as the example *par excellence* of the relationship between master and apprentice. In one story, it is told that Shams-i (who is described as *jende-poosh*: a person who dresses in rags and looks no more than a beggar on the streets) speaks to Rūmī and inquires about the

³⁴ At a time when Hosamoddīn became a disciple of Rūmī, he was already the head of a local order for the training of young men in chivalry. Jawid Mojaddedi, *The Masnavi: Book One*, Oxford, 2004, xviii.

³⁵ A Bausani, ‘Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī,’ in *The Encyclopaedia of Islām*, Vol 2, Leiden, 1995, 393b; also see Mojaddedi, *op cit*, xv.

important books from which he was teaching. Rūmī replied ‘these books contain things you would not understand.’ Then, suddenly, the books caught on fire and Rūmī in astonishment demanded, ‘how did you do that?’, and Shams-i replied ‘something you do not understand.’³⁶ This is the legendary story that is associated with Rūmī’s introduction to the real world of gnosis which can never be attained through normative means of learning. Capturing this experience, Rūmī writes, ‘Though you believe in the accuracy of the scholastic knowledge, it will not open your inner eyes to invisible existence.’³⁷

To clarify, Rūmī deliberately sets up a duality concerning the nature of knowledge. The illustration is literal insofar as it is demonstrative of two distinct cognitive states; it is not, however, a literal description of two apparently factual worlds. As such, there are two main definitions of knowledge (or *‘ilm*) in the *Mathnawī*: one is related to the visible and material world accessible through intellectual facilities, while the other is not worldly, not taught in schools and not accessible through books. This is often playful and entertaining as these modes are necessary in demonstrating the subtleties of inward knowledge. Like Sūhrawardī, the prerequisite for achieving the latter form of knowledge is to first realise and accept that there is an ‘invisible world’ that one is not at present able to ‘see’ and which is the only real and eternal aspect of existence.³⁸ Unlike Sūhrawardī, however, rather than philosophical discourse, Rūmī’s primary methodology is expressed through imaginative poesis. Rūmī therefore, makes significant appeal to the emotions³⁹ and

³⁶ For other versions of their meeting (including this one) see Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch, *Rūmī and Sūfism*, California, 1987, 23ff.

³⁷ M VI/263.

³⁸ This is indicative of the proper state of mind of the seeker, in that the subject wishes to understand more than what is made manifest. In addition, this arises from the fundamental clause and first principle in Islāmic practice, which is the act of *taslīm* (or surrender [to God]).

³⁹ Emotion here infers the power of love, loving-kindness, compassion, mercy, fear, repentance, and so on.

imagination of his readers through which indispensable access is gained to the Spirit. In this respect, the *Mathnawī* is to be read and understood within a specific genre of 'hierophanic history,' which escapes the conventional parameters of both factual history and imaginative fiction, yet remains within the rational appreciation of both the realm of history and fiction. It is history insofar as events in the lives of adepts are deemed possible, and did, in fact, occur and it is fiction insofar as it operates according to the stereoscopic dynamics of poetic function.⁴⁰ Most importantly, the *Mathnawī* serves to retain what is necessarily significant to 'religious experience' i.e. 'spiritual biography.' Therefore, figures of scriptural history, and other imaginative characters are specifically incorporated in order to engage the reader for didactic purposes.

The way to the 'invisible world' for Rūmī is through the heart. Firstly, Rūmī believes that spiritual education opens a window upon an 'invisible school' inside an individual's heart and upon the mysteries which are perceptible only through inner vision.⁴¹ Secondly, Rūmī acknowledges the indispensable role of the spiritual guide or master (*Ptr* or *Murshid*) as being necessary for the illumination of one's heart, though, like a good Muslim he maintains that it is above all upon the grace of God that one's direction toward this path is based in the first place.

Rūmī's poetry makes contrasting illustrations of terms in order to highlight effectively the difference between the functional quality and capacity of inward knowledge and surface knowledge in the *Mathnawī*. He does this beautifully by the use of antonyms; and his famous anecdote of the boatman and the grammarian can be used to illustrate this here. The conceited grammarian, a *nahwī*,

⁴⁰ Victoria Kennick Urupshurov, 'Hierophanic History and the Symbolic Process: A Response to Ricoeur's Call for a 'Generative Poetics,'" in *Religious Traditions*, Vol 13, 1990, 48.

⁴¹ Mohammad Este'lami, 'The concept of Knowledge in Rūmī's *Mathnawī*,' in Leonard Lewisohn, editor, *The Heritage of Sūfism: Classical Persian Sūfism from its Origins to Rūmī (700-1300)*, Vol 1, Oxford, 1999, 401-2.

one day embarked on a boat journey and asked the boatman: 'Have you ever studied *nahw* ('grammar')?' The boatman said that he had never studied grammar, and the *nahwī* said to him: 'O! I feel so sorry for you, half your life has gone for naught.' The boatman did not answer immediately and kept silent for a while, until the wind cast the boat into a whirlpool. Then the boatman shouted: 'do you know how to swim?' the proud grammarian said that he had never learnt to swim. The boatman said: 'O *Nahwī!* Your whole life has gone for naught, because the boat is sinking in this whirlpool.'⁴² Following this anecdote Rūmī offers a further play on words to finalise his point,

Here what is needed is self-effacement (*mahw*), not grammar (*nahw*).

If you're effaced from self, then plunge into the sea,
and be not frightened of any peril or danger.⁴³

Self-effacement comes from the pursuit of education in the school of the heart. Here the study of *fiqh* or *sarf* or *nahw* transforms into the 'jurisprudence of jurisprudence' (*fiqh-i fiqh*), the 'morphology of morphology' (*sarf-i sarf*), and the 'grammar of grammar' (*nahw-i nahw*),⁴⁴ placing emphasis on the knowledge that comes from within. Hence, the initial goal of the Sūfī adept is to first enter the realm of the heart and thereby illuminate his or her being. This concerns a central aspect in Sūfī practice that involves the constant purification and transformation of this psycho-spiritual organ. Obviously, the heart is not solely a Sūfī symbol. In invoking the heart, Rūmī primarily aimed to avoid the formal separations of linguistic, cultural or ideological boundaries and evoke a unitary and universal concept that would allow all people to embrace and adapt the *Mathnawī*. With the presence of Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians and Muslims in Konya, Rūmī recognised importance of demonstrating a harmonious centre to which all religious traditions belonged. In this approach, the

⁴² M I/2835.

⁴³ M III/1124.

⁴⁴ Este'lami, op cit, 403.

Mathnawī occupies an Islāmic paradigm, but at the same time transcends it in its profound appreciation of the hierophanic experience of the Other to such an extent that it transcends normative religious appreciation altogether. Reminiscent of an invitation of Christ into one's life, Rūmī maintained that it is, firstly, the opening of the gate in one's heart which is necessary in inaugurating the spiritual journey. 'Everyone in whose heart the gate is opened, will behold the sun from everywhere.'⁴⁵ Those hearts that remain closed and unaware remain in a constant state of imitation.

Again, like Saint Paul, who would emphasise faith over religion, but firmly echoing the words of the *Qūr'an*, Rūmī also relates that 'the knowledge of real religion' (*'ilm-i dīn*)⁴⁶ belongs to 'the knowledge of the one who becomes aware of his heart' (*'ilm-i ahl-i del*).⁴⁷ In short, 'worldly knowledge' (or rather knowledge absent of the heart) is an obstacle on the road to the *real* and *divine* knowledge.

Between the realizer and the imitator,
there are many differences.
The former is like David and the imitator
is only an echo [not a song, not a singer].⁴⁸

Rūmī maintains that humankind was not created to satisfy its material side of being, but rather material being is a vehicle by which one should approach the frontier of Eternity.⁴⁹ The point of the recurrent Sūfī theme of the *nafs* is, lastly, that humankind has become forgetful of its source of origin and remains a prisoner of

⁴⁵ M I/1409. For the use of Jesus in the *Mathnawī*, see J. R. King, 'Jesus and Joseph in Rūmī's *Mathnawī*,' *Muslim World*, LXXX, No. 2, Hartford, 1990, 81-95; For a detailed discussion on the subject of Jesus in Sūfī literature see Milad Milani, 'An Analysis of the mystical significance of Jesus in Sūfī Literature,' forthcoming.

⁴⁶ M I/1019.

⁴⁷ M I/3461; Este'lami, op cit, 405.

⁴⁸ M II/496.

⁴⁹ Este'lami, op cit, 406.

the physical self. So Rūmī recites, ‘The ear of the head is as cotton-wool in the ear of conscience, to open the inner ear, the ear of the head must become deaf.’⁵⁰

Conclusion

The subject of mystical experience remains a source of fascination for the West, especially the field of study known as Sūfism. There is no doubt that there is something that drives the human soul to perfection, even though this may be, in reality, an unattainable goal. This very thing, this force or energy was described and put into words by the great mystics, who had recognised its potential, as love. Hence the theoretical construction of the realm of the heart in Sūfī literature and the constant reiteration of its distinguished ‘reality’ from its opposite force, the intellect (*aqī*). The Sūfīs held ‘heart education’ in such esteem that their central identity and image was classically formed around the concept of a *dervish*⁵¹, which was deliberately contrasted to the monetary associations of intellectual or scholastic education. The dervish, by comparison, was the graduate of the ‘invisible school’ of the heart. As a result, the works of Sūhrawardī and Rūmī are especially important for an investigation into the nature and reality of mystical experience and inner knowledge as they contain much of the sacred knowledge that had been kept secretly within the oral tradition of Sūfism for many centuries.

For an approach to the subject area I have here discussed only in brief the methodological technique that I believe to be most pertinent to an academic investigation of this style. I must stress again that the great labours of Nicholson, Arberry and Corbin have been a phenomenal step forward in this way and likewise the efforts of Eliade and the Traditionalists have also been

⁵⁰ M I/571.

⁵¹ Literally ‘poor’ or ‘indigent,’ which was to be applied later on as a symbol of inner poverty or spiritual poverty.

paramount in achieving a closer appreciation of the esoteric and gnosiological content of mystical traditions.

The central tenet discussed here is the idea that religious traditions of the world are not only accidentally (in the philosophical sense of the word) different but that they are connected at their core by a common thread of values and principles, which require proper means of academic attention and interpretation. As such, the 'hermeneutics of esotericism' is engaged in hierophanic history and interested in the meaning and value of the principles that underpin and give life to its practical and spiritual dimension. Therefore, adequate academic research and specialised attention aims to reveal core relative factors at the heart of religious practices that not only drive religious agencies but motivate religious experience as a whole.

One such common factor related to spiritual practice I have introduced in this paper as 'self knowledge.' Its discourse stretches back into antiquity and it permeates the various canonical traditions today. Moreover, as I have demonstrated in this paper, it is a central tenet of both Sūhrawardī and Rūmī's mystical epistemology. The pursuit in self knowledge is not a promotion in the ego-self but rather its demotion from a state of attachment and pride in order to reveal the 'real-self' or the 'non-self.' To return to the Hadith quote, 'he who knows his self, knows his Lord,' the individual in seeking his or her own self will come to find nothing substantial or permanent but God [the Real, the True (*al-Haqq*)].