Religious Experience in Relation to Sufism

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I dedicate this article to the memory of my father, Mukhambet Maltabarov (d. 26.06. 2025)

Abstract:

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the study of religion was largely centered around the idea that a specific type of personal experience lies at the core of all religious traditions. However, recent scholarship has questioned this notion highlighting the limitations it poses to the study of religion and its separation from social and cultural contexts. This article questions the exclusiveness of the Western concept of religious experience using Sufism as a case study. The article argues that the Sufi understanding of religious experience, deeply rooted in Islamic doctrinal and practical foundations, includes some elements consistent with the Western romantic interpretation of experience. For this I will explore Sufi practices examining both their historical development and mystical content and outlining the possible characteristics of the Islamic Sufi perspective on communication with and experience of the divine.

Keywords: Sufism; Sufi-practices; doctrinal Islam; mysticism; religious experience;

Introduction

The concept of experience played a central role in German Romanticism and was understood as a reaction to the dominance of reason during the Enlightenment, specifically as an antidote to the rational approach to reality. Particular attention was paid to the sensory subjective event, which is necessarily connected with something significant that goes beyond the framework of everyday life (Frank 2004; Brusslan 2020). This interpretation of experience, which can provide a more complete picture of the world and as an immediate sensation connected with a specific lived moment, had influenced the understanding of religion. Such philosophers of religion as Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950), and Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) contributed to the image of religion based on the experience of the sacred or the

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numinous, which is of an extraordinary nature. William James (1842–1910), the American philosopher and psychologist, also defended the uniqueness of religious experience. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), James provided a number of characteristics according to which an experience can be identified as religious or mystical. Among them are passivity, ineffability, noetic quality, and transient quality (James, 1985, pp. 379-82). The above-mentioned ideas served as the basis for the development of the phenomenological approach to religious experience.

The constructivist approach to religious experience was mainly developed in 1970s in the works of Wayne Proudfoot (b.1939). In his book *Religious Experience* (1985), Proudfoot stands for the determination of religious experience by a cultural context of participants involved. One of the examples of the constructivist approach in the twenty first century is Ann Taves and her shift of focus from religious experience to the processes by which people give value and meaning to their experiences, religious or not. Taves suggests that the analysis and explanation of religion, as one of the most complex cultural phenomena, should include a division of religion into 'the constituent parts,' involving basic cognitive, psychological and biological terms (Taves, 2009, p. 5).

The priority of experience in understanding religion had also influenced the concept of mysticism. Scholars of mysticism have criticized this one-sided and limited approach to mysticism. Bernard McGinn has suggested that not only the God-human encounter, i.e., experience, but also everything which prepares and directs this encounter and all that comes after it is mystical and should be taken into consideration (McGinn, 1991, pp. 8-10). Ninian Smart distinguishes between various 'aspects' of mysticism: 'the experiences themselves, the paths or systems of contemplative techniques often associated with them, and the doctrines that arise from mysticism or are affected by it' (Smart, 2006, p. 442).

Nevertheless, despite the dominance of the constructivist approach in recent studies of Islamic mysticism there is an attempt to analyze Sufism from different perspectives. Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh in his study on practical mysticism in Islam and Christianity has suggested addressing mysticism as both a cultural and personal phenomenon. Applying a comparative approach, he focuses on the internal elements of mystical teaching. As he explains: 'It is clear that an awareness of the relationship between mysticism and its context is important for understanding different mystical traditions. However, contrary to the hard constructivist position, it *is* possible for one to speak of a meaningful category of mysticism' (Zarrabi-Zadeh, 2016, p. 8).

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In the same way, but on a different subject, Alireza Doostdar, in his study on religious reason and its entanglements with science and modernity, examines contemporary practices in Iran, which can simultaneously be linked with both science and the domain of superstition. Doostdar argues that the religious or mystical should be examined on its own grounds and preconditions, so that it can be rational without being in opposition to modern and being modern as such (Doostdar, 2018, pp. 3-4). Methodologically, I will follow Zarrabi-Zadeh's approach and examine Islamic Sufi practices pointing to both their historical development and mystical elements. This paper will show that the emphasis on personal religious experience as a privileged heuristic space can also be found within the Islamic Sufi tradition. By this it will argue that the Sufi understanding of religious experience includes different elements, whether Islamic doctrinal and practical foundations, or modern Western interpretations.

Religious Experience in Islam

Before focusing on religious experience in Islam it is helpful to notice that the concept of experience as such occupies a special role in Western modernity. Elizabeth Goodstein in her study on boredom mentions changes in the understanding of the subjective experience. She argues that the perception of boredom as a problematic situation, which creates negative consequences, is a modern phenomenon connected with the notion of subjective experience (Goodstein, 2005, pp. 6-10). Goodstein goes further and suggests that modernity should be analyzed not as a historical period but as a history of the development of subjective experience (Goodstein, 2003, p. 12). Harvie Ferguson assumes that if modern framework is based on objective/subjective differentiation an experience can serve as a unifying tool, or as a bridge, for the subjective and the objective (Ferguson, 2000, pp. 1-2). Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh also mentions that without certain alterations and adaptations medieval mystical traditions could not survive and enter modern realities. Among these alterations and adaptations, he draws attention to concentration on the *experiential* aspect of the mystical, where mysticism was mainly defined as a kind of 'experience' rather than a textual sort of exegesis, metaphysics, or theology. The emphasis on experience, psychologization, as well as liberation from theological and metaphysical domains assisted in the survival of mysticism in modern time (Zarrabi-Zadeh, 2020, pp. 4-5). The importance of personal experience, along with the idea about the inner self as the ultimate source of spiritual development, influenced

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the further spread of Sufism in the West where the poetic and individual aspects of Sufi teachings were emphasized and the political and social structures of Islamic mysticism were downplayed (see Maltabarova, 2022, pp. 176-84).

The concept of religious experience at the end of the twentieth century was rather new for Islamic researchers. The case study of the personal religious experience of Muslims was deficient, making any comparison with other Abrahamic religious traditions problematic (Hermansen, 1985, pp. 134-35). Moreover, wide-spread assumptions about the limited everyday life of Muslims and "the ready-made and scripture-based morality of Islam" resulted in partial studies and interest in such topics as creativity, personhood and emotional modes (Marsden, 2005, p. 8). However, there is no doubt that detachment from everyday life and communication with the divine are present in Islam.

In fact, the Islamic religion is based on personal religious experience of encounter with the divine. The experience of God in Islam, although with different interpretations, can be associated with the term *mi'raj*, meaning a ladder or an ascension, and which is mentioned first of all in regard to the prophet Muhammad (570–632) and his experience of the presence of God. This particular experience is interpreted as the Night Journey consisting of *al-Isra'* and *al-Mi'raj*, which Muhammad took during a single night. As some scholars argue the perception of Muhammad, of Muslim community and religious life was deeply shaped by interpretations and reinterpretations of the prophet's journey to heaven (Vuckovic, 2005, pp. 13-21). During the *al-Isra*, Muhammad traveled to the al-Aqsa Mosque where he led other prophets in prayer. In the *al-Mi'raj*, he ascended to heaven where he greeted the prophets and spoke to God who directly instructed Muhammad on the details of prayer for Muslims (Schimmel, 1985, p. 28). The personality of Muhammad became the tool of religious experience even though Islam is centered around a sacred scripture, and not around the prophet who brought it (Schimmel, 1975, p. 214).

The Islamic religion clearly emphasizes the active participation of the believer in religious life. Even though Muslims believe in one God, angels, holy books, prophets, resurrection, and divine predestination (Esposito, 2002, pp. 5-7), the five pillars (religious duties) of Islam (witnessing, prayer, alms, fasting and pilgrimage) require clear actions. For example, Murata and Chittick examine the meaning of prayer for Muslims (Murata and Chittick, 1994, pp. 11-12), that is central to a life of the believer. From this perspective, it can be assumed that religious experience in Islam is implied in constant (collective and personal)

worship and not in a separate event. The Quran (sacred scripture) and hadith (prophetic tradition) also urge to actions which are connected with the central concept of Islamic faith that is *tawhid* (divine unity and uniqueness). This unity implies a focus on both transcendence and immanence of God (Geaves, 2001, p. 2). In different verses of the Quran, God's goodness is described in various natural events to which humans are obligated to pay attention (Watt, 2014, p. 12). Another important point to underline is that Muslims are required to perform their prayers or any other rituals in such way as if God observes not only their actions but also knows their intentions. This idea is formulated in the concept of *ihsan*, according to which Muslims are supposed to perform religious duties with sincerity in heart and awareness of the divine presence in life at every moment of time (Yaran, 2004, p. 7).

Thus, the first characteristic of the Islamic Sufi perspective on experience of the divine can be connected with consistency in worship.

Sufism

If one considers the above-mentioned concept of *ihsan*, one may assume that early Sufis stressed the importance of the inner religious life and were against the mechanical performance of religious duties. In this regard, it is helpful to outline briefly what Sufism is and who the Sufis are. According to Sara Sviri, Sufism is 'a practical and devotional path that leads to the transformation of the self from its lowly instinctual nature to the ultimate state of subsistence in God – a state in which all blameworthy traits fall away' (Sviri, 2002, p. 196). Alexander Knysh describes Sufism as a complex system and writes about the importance of mystical and ascetical parts of Sufism, the separation of which is misleading since Sufi teachings were historically organically incorporated into the life of Muslims (Knysh, 2017, p. 14). Sufism is a major mystical tradition in Islam formed in the seventh and eighth centuries and based on a sacred scripture (the Quran) and a prophetic tradition (the Sunnah). It was during this period that some individuals appeared who stressed the importance of an ascetic lifestyle and constant praying to God. Around these individuals there formed first small circles of students and followers in Syria and Iraq. During the next stage (by the thirteenth century), these small communities contributed to the emergence of social institutions, or Sufi brotherhoods, which created their own set of practices and manuals. By the sixteenth century, Sufism started to play an important role in Muslim society, influencing political and intellectual thought. This

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situation continued until the twentieth century, when Sufi brotherhoods were severely criticized by Islamic reformers as incompatible with progress and modern life realities (Knysh, 2000, pp. 1-4).

In a discussion of the Sufi experience of the divine and Islamic mystical practices, the concept of mystical states (*ahwal*) and stations (*maqamat*) occupies an important place. There are numerous descriptions of mystical states which contributed to the creation of the different lists of spiritual stations in Sufi pedagogical manuals. For example, Abdul Karim al-Qushayri (d. 1074) in his Sufi handbook suggests around fifty mystical stations, while Abdullah Ansari (d. 1089) the author of another famous Sufi treatise provides readers with the list of one hundred stations (Ernst, 2007, pp. 102-103). In this regard, Zarrabi-Zadeh notices that 'the incorporation of stations and states in Sufi texts refers, in fact, to an important characteristic of practical mysticism in their viewpoints, namely, its hierarchical and dynamic feature' (Zarrabi-Zadeh, 2016, p. 10). Moreover, the mystic is highly encouraged to experience each of the stations completely to acquire an indispensable experience for further development. However, if the station is completed there is no need to return to it and apply the same techniques to the next station:

> since one passes through successive stages on the mystical path and enjoys different spiritual status therein, the practices one should carry out in a specific stage are not necessarily those one has to perform in the previous or subsequent stages (Zarrabi-Zadeh, 2016, p. 10).

There are different lists of stations and there is no strict agreement on their arrangement. It is helpful to give some examples here. According to Carl Ernst, the earliest Sufi description of spiritual stations is a short guidance from Shaqiq al-Balkhi (d. 810), written in the Khorasan region of eastern Iran. This guidance, *the Manners of Worship*, suggests four stations on the way of soul towards God: asceticism, fear, longing, and love. The main idea of the guidance is the development of religious virtues and a righteous life. To give a better understanding of this process there is a description of a person who has reached the last stage, that is love, and consequently succeeded in religious progress:

> You will never meet him when he is not smiling, sweetly and nobly, pure in morals, never frowning, good in company, full of good news, avoiding sins, contradicting liars, never hearing anything except what God loves. One who hears or sees him

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> loves him, because of the love of God the Mighty and Majestic for him (al-Balkhi, quoted in Ernst, 2007, p. 102).

As one notices, even when speaking about love in the earliest texts Sufis emphasized the meaning of outward behavior, the social element of spiritual development. From this perspective it is problematic to consider religious experience as a single and extraordinary event in the life of the mystic, as compared with, for example, Christian Catholic mystics and their divine ecstasies, or modern romantic interpretations where the emotional part is dominant. Good manners and an active social life can be interpreted as signs of inner work and God's constant presence in a life of the believer. This, however, does not mean that in the history of Sufism there is no place for an intensive personal experience of the divine. The idea about the intensive personal experience of the divine can be analyzed in terms of the concepts of intoxication (*fana*) and sobriety (*baqa*) (Wilcox, 2011, p. 96), which in early Sufi works were difficult to clearly identify since they correlate with other concepts (see Mojaddedi, 2003). Historically, the concepts of *fana* and *baqa* were elaborated in the schools of Khorasan and Baghdad. The difference between these schools can also be explained by the geographical location of these regions: Baghdad, as a continuation of the authoritarian tradition of the Sasanian imperia, and Khorasan, as a rebellion against the Sasanian despotism and later Arabic influence (Graham, 1999, pp. 108-109).

From the perspective of the masters of Khorasan the ultimate aim of the mystical journey was the annihilation of human individuality where human actions are no longer under human control but caused by the divine presence. As a result, the behavior and condition of the mystic can be seen as 'drunk', because he is 'intoxicated' by divine love. According to the school of Baghdad such behavior indicates the fact that the mystic was deluded by his own desires. Moreover, this behavior can be identified as spiritually 'immature' since a Sufi master is not merely a mystic but also a model for other Muslims and must behave according to the norms of Islamic law (Wilcox, 2011, p.103).

Among the most influential masters and advocates of the sobriety school is often mentioned the leader of the school of Baghdad Abul Qasim al-Junayd (d. 910). The doctrine of intoxication was mostly attributed to Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 922). Al-Junayd's ideas about the mystical path were socially acceptable. His ideas imply balance and selectivity in religious life. He emphasizes that the believer gets rid of some attributes of self-interest through constant worship and describes three stages of purification:

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> The obliteration of attributes, characteristics and natural qualities in your motives when you carry out your religious duties, making great efforts and doing the opposite of what you may desire, and compelling yourself to do the things which you do not wish to do.
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> The obliteration of your pursuit after pleasures and even the sensation of pleasure in obedience to God's behests–so that you are exclusively His, without any intermediary means of contact.
>
> The obliteration of the consciousness of having attained the vision of God at the final stage of ecstasy when God's victory over you is complete. At this stage you are obliterated and have eternal life with God, and you exist only in the existence of God because you have been obliterated. Your physical being continues but your individuality has departed (al-Junaid, quoted in Abdel-Kader, 1962, p. 81).

The famous Sufi author Hujwiri explains that it is necessary to distinguish between two types of 'drunkenness': the first is that one when the mystic is drunk from 'the wine of affection', as a result of the vision of benefits that God gives (good emotions, joy, peace); the second is from 'the cup of love' as a result of the vision of (loving) only God. This type of 'drunkenness' represents real sobriety (Mojaddedi, 2003, p. 9). A good example of this argumentation and of the important idea of the Muslim religious experience is found in the words of the female Muslim mystic Rabia of Basra (d. 801):

> O God! If I worship Thee in fear of Hell, burn me in Hell; and if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, withhold not Thine everlasting Beauty (Rabia, quoted in Nicholson, 1989, p. 115).

Rabia of Basra, being the only female saint in the Muslim world, is accepted as a pioneer with the idea of disinterested selfless love for God where a believer can be compared with a lover who is absolutely in love with his beloved (Schimmel, 1975, p. 40). As Margaret Smith notices, Rabia was probably the first Sufi to describe a jealous God – an idea known in the Abrahamic religions as the ultimate prohibition of worship of

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something else except monotheistic God (Smith, 1974, p. 108). Rabia makes it clear that she loves only God:

> O Beloved of hearts, I have none like unto Thee,
> Therefore, have pity this day on the sinner who comes to Thee.
> O my Hope and my Rest and my Delight
> The heart can love none other but Thee (Rabia, quoted in Smith, 1974, p. 55).

According to Schimmel, Mansur al-Hallaj is usually depicted as the martyr of Islam par excellence, the perfect lover totally submitted to the divine beloved (Schimmel, 1975, p. 65). The problem of sobriety and intoxication was solved and interpreted by al-Hallaj in such a way that only absolute submission to God leads to union with the divine (Massignon, 1982, p. 274). Al-Hallaj understands this submission as only possible through love. And without love, intoxication cannot take place. Love is the ultimate path to God:

> The calling of love (*mahabba*) calls us to desire (*shawq*), the calling of desire to rapture (*walah*); and the calling of rapture calls us to God (*Allah*)! As for those who feel no inner incentive to answer this calling, their expectation will be frustrated; they waste their time in the deserts of deviation; they are the ones whom God does not think much of (al-Hallaj, quoted in Massignon, 1982, p. 26).

As one notices, for al-Hallaj, love provides both absolute submission and the potential for growth. One can assume that without authentic love human individuality does not develop but can degrade. Moreover, he speaks about passion and desire as necessary parts of religious devotion and also of God's desire to be loved. However, even the most radical ideas, such as Rabia's self-less love or al-Hallaj's passionate love were necessarily based on constant religious worship.

The heart in Sufism, as articulated by Rumi and other mystics, is a vessel that can become illuminated through love and devotion. When the heart becomes a true mirror for the Divine, it is believed to reflect God's attributes and qualities, leading to a profound and intimate relationship with the Creator. The purification of the heart is one of the fundamental goals of Sufism, which involves eliminating negative traits such as arrogance, greed, and pride. Therefore, Sufi interpretations of religious experience include both a personal deep connection with God, i.e., love, and the proper outward manifestations of that love. Based on this one can formulate the second characteristic of the Islamic Sufi

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perspective on the experience of the divine and that is the importance of outward behavior, or social importance. The third characteristic is deep inner orientation.

Practices of the Sufi Path

Probably one of the most famous examples of Sufi practices, where the above-mentioned concepts of intoxication and sobriety are involved, is the Mevlevi whirling practice or *sema*. The Mevleviya is a Sufi order in Konya (a city now in Turkey and a former capital of the Anatolian Seljuk Sultanate), which was founded by the followers of the distinguished thirteenth century Sufi-poet Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207-1273) (Lewis, 2008, pp. 6-7).

Even though the whirling practice existed in the Muslim world much earlier this order was the first to institutionalize whirling (Schimmel, 1975, p. 179). The Mevlevis also gained prominence under the Ottoman Empire and the whirling ceremony was practiced until the foundation of the Turkish Republic (see Can, 2015). In the middle of the twentieth century, it was again permitted to perform each year on the anniversary of Rumi's death, the seventeenth of December (*sheb-i arus*). Although the Sufi whirling practice received global popularity it is only an extension of the more basic practice of *dhikr* (remembrance of God or ritual chant) (Avery, 2004, p. 4).

According to legend Rumi drew attention to the blacksmiths as they were working and he began spinning in a circle, with arms outstretched, attracted by the sound of the hammers. Overflowing with love of the divine Rumi danced and the whirling practice was born (Schimmel, 2001, p. 197). The whirling movement can illustrate a circle of life where birth and death succeed each other and where every atom of existence is part of the divine reality (Zarrabi-Zadeh, 2016, p. 139; see also Fakhry, 2004, pp. 215-23). The topic of death and birth can also be found in the special attire of the participants. The white apparel of dancers symbolizes shrouds, the black coats symbolize a tomb, and the high hats represent gravestones. The dropping of the black coats means rebirth and the raised right hand calls upon divine grace while the lowered left hand symbolizes the transfer of this grace to Earth through the human heart (Vitray-Meyerovitch, 1987, pp. 44-46).

In addition to this interpretation there are also interconnected moral and mystical elements. In this dance Sufis purify their hearts from egoism and seek to achieve the divine reality. Despite this deep meaning, the whirling ceremony generated controversy

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due to the integration of music and dance into religious worship. The instant effect of *sema* is a trance-like state of ecstasy but the ultimate goal of the performance is to listen to the soul which 'speaks' with God and is totally immersed in this process (Lewisohn, 1997, pp. 27-28).

Another important Islamic practice, already mentioned above, is *dhikr*, which is defined as 'the act of reminding, then oral mentioning of the memory, especially the tireless repetition of an ejaculatory litany, finally the very technique of this mention' (Gardet, 1965, p. 223). It should be emphasized that the remembrance of God, in a form of the obligatory daily prayers, is the duty of all Muslims not just Sufis. As Raudvere argues, *dhikr*, being strongly connected with Sufi institutions, may vary structurally depending on the social and political circumstances and has a potentiality to be a united source for various Sufi communities in the past and present (Raudvere, 2002, pp. 171-72).

Early Islamic mystics emphasized that the names of God should be recited constantly day and night, alone or among people, loudly or silently (Ernst, 2007, p. 92). *Dhikr* can take various forms ranging from silent contemplation to vocal repetition of phrases or prayers. The most common forms of *dhikr* include the recitation of *La ilaha illallah* (There is no god but God), *Subhanallah* (Glory be to God), *Alhamdulillah* (Praise be to God), and *Allahu Akbar* (God is Great). These phrases, which reflect key theological truths of Islam, are not merely recited mechanically but are meant to be absorbed with full consciousness and devotion bringing the practitioner closer to the divine presence. The practice can be done individually or in a group, often within a Sufi community, which emphasizes the collective power of spiritual remembrance. There are some requirements for ritual purity, sincerity and gesture, which were further developed in the rules of the Sufi orders (Maltabarova, 2022, p. 242).

The Sufi understanding of the practice of remembrance of God points to the requirement to include the spiritual process in everyday life. This idea was particularly elaborated in the Naqshbandi Sufi circles as complete proximity to and focus on God (Persian: *khalwat dar anjuman*), when perfect concentration on the divine is expected both in a crowd and in solitude (Schimmel, 1975, p. 243). This act of remembrance plays a fundamental role in Sufi spiritual life serving as a tool to purify the heart and bring the seeker into direct experience with the divine. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr notices: 'Dhikr is a means of centering the mind and heart on God, which eventually leads to the realization of God's presence in all aspects of life' (Nasr, 1991, p. 64). For Sufis, the heart is seen as a mirror that reflects divine light when it is purified by *dhikr*. Regular repetition

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of divine names helps to remove the impurities of the soul such as arrogance, pride, and selfishness, and creates a vessel capable of receiving divine light. As Nasr explains, 'The purification of the heart through dhikr is the first step toward realizing the divine presence in one's life (Nasr, 1991, p. 68).'

Moreover, *dhikr* is closely tied to the idea of spiritual ecstasy. When practiced with intense focus it can lead to states of deep mystical experiences where the boundaries between the self and God begin to dissolve. Rumi's poetry often describes how *dhikr* brings the seeker closer to a state of divine intoxication where the practitioner forgets their own existence and becomes one with God. This state of intoxication is considered an important stage on the way to the ultimate goal of the Sufi path, that is the annihilation of the self. In Sufi teachings the ego (or *nafs*) is seen as the primary obstacle to experiencing God. The process of annihilation involves surrendering the self, letting go of attachments to the physical world, and allowing the divine presence to fill every aspect of one's being. As a result, the seeker reaches a state of *baqa* where their identity is no longer separate from the divine (Nasr, 1991, p. 74).

Muraqaba (meditation) or Sufi meditation, involves focused contemplation, often guided by a spiritual master. This practice helps the practitioner to move beyond the physical and mental distractions of everyday life and attain a deeper awareness of the divine presence. In Sufism the guidance of a spiritual master or sheikh is crucial. The sheikh is a figure who has attained a high level of spiritual realization and helps to guide the seeker along the mystical path. The relationship between the sheikh and the disciple is often viewed as one of deep spiritual connection with the sheikh acting as a mirror to reflect the seeker's inner state and provide guidance in their pursuit of divine union (Nasr, 1991, p. 61).

Religious experience in Sufism is rooted in the belief that God is present in all things and through constant devotion and spiritual practices one can encounter God's presence directly. This is contrasted with the more external, legalistic practices of mainstream Islam. Nevertheless, Sufism involves both outward and inward dimensions. The outward practices such as, for example, constant prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage, serve as tools to discipline the soul while the inward practices aim to polish the heart, as a mirror, preparing the seeker for an experience of divine love and presence (Nasr, 1991, p. 14). As Knysh writes, early Sufis established their approach through special behavior: they allegorized, intensified, and internalized traditional morals which Muslims are supposed

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to practice every day. As a result, they went to extremes in the performance of religious duties (Knysh, 2017, p. 26). Therefore, Sufism emphasizes direct personal experience as a journey of love and longing which may resonate with modern Western interpretations of experience. However, this journey is strictly based on the performance of religious duties and practices that purify the heart, focus the mind, and surrender the ego.

Conclusion

This article has examined the limitations of the Western conceptualization of religious experience particularly when applied to non-Christian traditions like Sufism. The notion that personal experience is central to all religious traditions has long shaped the academic study of religion especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, this approach oversimplifies the complexities of religious practices outside of the Western context. Sufism serves as an important case study to demonstrate how the Western framework fails to capture the multifaceted nature of Islamic religious experience. The following characteristics of the Islamic Sufi perspective on communication with and experience of the divine were identified: consistency in worship, the importance of outward behavior or social importance, and deep inner orientation. It should also be noted that this experience is possible if the negative traits of ego are eliminated. In other words, the goal of Sufism is not a short-term incomprehensible ineffable experience but the annihilation of the human ego. As one may assume, there is no contradiction between the importance of outward behavior and deep connection to God. It is rather one step further, continue a normal life or completely seclude yourself with God. The rich history of Sufism provides examples of both approaches.

Through a detailed examination of Sufi practices, we have seen that religious experience in Sufism is not merely a subjective and personal phenomenon. Rather, it is deeply intertwined with both the theological teachings of Islam and the practical methods employed by Sufis in their pursuit of the divine. Sufis understand religious experience more than just an individual encounter with the divine – it is a communal and doctrinally grounded process that is shaped by centuries of tradition, spiritual guidance, and cultural context. Personal experience of the divine was described by Sufis in terms of mystical stages and states. In their attempts to be in proximity to God Sufis developed a range of techniques including, for example, *dhikr* which is supposed to bring the mystic into a

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certain condition. However, it would be misleading to emphasize the primary importance of this condition for Sufis. Because for them *dhikr* is not just a practice but a way of life; a constant state of remembrance that permeates all moments turning the ordinary into the extraordinary. As Nasr notes, 'To live in a state of dhikr is to be constantly in God's presence, regardless of external circumstances' (Nasr, 1991, p. 74). This continuous practice shapes Sufi worldviews imbuing daily activities with spiritual significance and making the practitioner aware of God's presence in every aspect of existence.

By recognizing the continuity of the Islamic conception of religious experience this article has also challenged the assumption that religious experience, as understood in the Western tradition, is universally applicable. Sufism offers a compelling counterpoint to the individualistic, experiential model that dominates Western discourse. It underscores the importance of situating religious experience within its proper social, cultural, and theological context rather than attempting to impose an external, generalized framework. Ultimately, this article highlights the richness and depth of Islamic perspectives on divine experience. As scholars continue to engage with non-Western religious traditions it is crucial to adopt more nuanced and culturally sensitive approaches that respect the unique qualities of each tradition. The study of religious experience may therefore evolve to incorporate diverse viewpoints, ensuring that it remains an inclusive and meaningful field of inquiry.

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