

**Prof. Kari Vogt**

**Subject: Islamic Mysticism and Sufism**  
**Nationality: Norway / Major: Islamic Studies**  
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**Vogt:** I have been told that you are an expert on mysticism. I am not myself specialized in this field, but I am very interested in this subject. My question is about mysticism's place in the modern [Moslem] society, as a cursory view of history shows us that there has not been a peaceful coexistence between Sufism, jurisprudence and Shari'ah in the Islamic world.

**Ja'fari:** The story of Sufism and mysticism in Islamic countries is different from other countries including Eastern lands like India. Moslem scholars, philosophers and jurists had challenged the Sufism which presents itself as a school of thought independent from Islam; otherwise, the mysticism which is built upon the Islamic worldview has been always received warmly in Moslem societies.

Moslem philosophers and jurists have continuously criticized Sufism, of course not mysticism in general, due to its cynicistic attitudes towards daily life and political and social affairs. They only care about spiritual matters, of course in a deviated fashion, and pay no attention to other aspects of life, while Islam is simultaneously the religion of here and the religion of hereafter as well.

Generally speaking, Moslem philosophers take a tough stance against Sufis in two issues: their cynical view of the worldly life and pantheism, both of which are condemned by Islam and other Abrahamic religions.

Nevertheless, Sufis and mystics have shed light on such precious realities via their spiritual efforts and ecstasies, which are neither resisted by Islam nor by Moslems. Thus, Persian and Arabic literatures are fraught with issues which have been unearthed by mystics. Therefore, we need to separate these two positive and negative points in our assessments of Sufism. If, instead of saying that *there is nothing but Him*, Sufis had formulated their pantheism as "the world is a reflection of God and His divine attributes", no religion would ever

defy them and humanity could in fact be more benefitted from their moral and spiritual achievements. Rumi has successfully adopted this strategy in his *Masnavi* and poetized his mystical views based on genuine Islamic sources. According to my researches, Rumi has discussed almost 2200 verses of the Holy Quran and 756 prophetic traditions in his *Masnavi*. One can find the "Hekmat-wise", of course not philosophical in a disciplinary sense of the word, roots of many branches of human sciences in Rumi's *Masnavi*. Thus, we see that Rumi, as a Sufi poet, has no serious defier among Moslem jurists and scholars, although there are also some criticisms of his views, as I have discussed myself some eighty cases of them in my 15-volume *Critical Commentary of Rumi's Masnavi*.

**Vogt:** One dimension of Sufism is self-discipline. On the other hand, we see the political face of Sufism in Safavid Iran. Even once in Turkey, Rumi's *Masnavi* was banned for a while, as it incited social movements. What is your assessment of these two aspects and their mutual impressions?

**Ja'fari:** The *Masnavi* ban in Turkey dates back to the Ottomans' reign and it was not a political issue. There is no sign of political debates in Rumi's *Masnavi* in the modern sense of the term, neither in Machiavellian nor in non-Machiavellian modes of discourse. The problem is indeed Rumi's extraordinary intimations of the noble principles of humanity which happen to be against the interests of Machiavellian politicians. The *Masnavi* ban was either due to Rumi's pantheistic theses or debates of determinism or even his brilliant advices for kings. Thus, the *Masnavi* ban in Turkey was not politically motivated, and it was not even so common, either.

In the Safavid period, Sufism and mysticism had been taken into the service of Shi'ism, and the Safavids sought to use the spirituality of Sufism to unite various ethnic groups inside Iranian territory. Said differently, Sufism was not considered as an end as such, and there were great Shiah clerics who did not recognize Sufism as an authentic worldview. Safavid Kings were heavily under the influence of these clerics and couldn't ignore their views.

For example, in Shah Abbas Safavid's time, there was a Shi'ah scholar in Najaf called Sheikh Ahmad Ardabili (also known as Muqaddas Ardabili), who was highly respected by Shah Abbas due to his piety and juristic status. Muqaddas Ardabili was an anti-Sufism cleric. It is related that once one of the commanders of Shah Abbas was convicted to death by the Shah. The commander was told by his companions to travel to Najaf and bring a handwritten from Muqaddas Ardabili, may the Shah spare him. The commander proves to Muqaddas Ardabili that he is not guilty. Muqaddas Ardabili writes to Shah the following

letter:

*The Lord of the Kingdom of Earth, Abbas should know that this man is innocent. Spare his fault, may God spare some of your faults. The Servant of Ali, the Prince of Believers, Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Ardabili.*

The commander goes to the king with the letter. Shah Abbas takes the letter, kisses it and says, "The Sheikh has sent me good news of intercession". Then he replies the letter as follows:

*To the respected presence of Hujat-tul-Islam Sheikh Ahmad Ardabili: We forgave this man and hope to enjoy the intercession of that man [in Hereafter]. The Dog of Ali's Threshold, Abbas.*

**Vogt:** Sufism has different aspects, whether positive or negative. How can we separate Sufism from mysticism while Sufism has exercised heavy influence on Shi'ah and Shi'ism? On the other hand, how has Sufism managed to enrich and evolve itself through Shi'ism? I have some information of mysticism in Iran and know that Imam Khomeini has held courses on it. Regarding the roots of mysticism and Sufism, as well as mysticism in the past and also present, how do you appraise the developments of mysticism?

**Ja'fari:** Mysticism in Shi'ism is not tantamount to the denial of realities. Particularly when we take account of Imam Ali's method in the *Nahjulbalaghah* and read the holy verses of the Quran, we find that true mysticism cannot ignore the realities in the world. This mysticism is neither Buddhist mysticism, nor Hinduism, nor the mysticism which only recognizes the "self" and nothing else.

This genuine mysticism does not neglect any aspect of reality; on the contrary, it burnishes the reality and its goal is the expansion of human "self" in this shined reality which reflects Divine Essence. This mysticism does not ignore obligations either, but it does not disregard even the most significant social issues, however mundane they may seem. As a matter of fact, it polishes the reality to make it even *finer*.

Everything is in its proper place in this form of mysticism, and no human instinct is ignored. It does not even deny egotism, but it does advise us to, "Make it milder!" It does not say that you must kill the "self", as "self" has departed the beginning and heads toward eternity. We must only restrain the "natural self" and instincts in the interests of reason and conscience. This mysticism accepts the Shari'ah codes and thus many Moslem clerics and jurists have been mystics as well.

For example, Sheikh Ansari had studied Rumi's *Masnawi* under a renowned mystic in Isfahan for two years. We do not remove anything from the world and the human spirit; as a matter of fact, we interpret and burnish them, while Sufism does not have these features.

Man always acts immoderately. If we do not say that moderate man is

exceptional, we can say that he is in the minority. When man is said not to deny being, matter, motion, law and order but to settle with these issues and use them as a vehicle to ascend to the realm of incorporeality and eternity, he holds the matter so tightly that the soul, immortality and spiritual majesties are forgotten! We have such problems with the immoderate man. When man is said to watch himself, he becomes so much immersed in himself that he says, "*I am the truth*" (as Mansur Hallaj has been quoted to have said)!" Or he says, "*There is nothing beneath my mantle but God*" (attributed to Aba Yazid Bastami)!"

Yes, you are great, but God is not so much small for you to drunkenly say, "I am the truth!" We have such Shi'ah scholars as Allameh Tabatabaei, who was simultaneously a philosopher, a mystic and a mathematician, or Khajeh Nasiruddin Tusi, who was a mathematician, natural scientist and a mystic as well. These issues are being harmonized in Shi'ism in an exemplary way without any act of immoderation. The soul flourishes and can use the world as a platform through which the soul can rise to the heavens. We have such distinguished mystics in the Shi'ah world as Allameh Tabatabaei, Sayyed Ali Qazi Tabatabaei, Seyed Hussein Bakui, Mirza Ali Shirazi, Mirza Abul Hassan Jelwah, Mirza Mahdi Ashtyani and others, who had an integrative view of knowledge and saw no essential conflicts between various branches of knowledge.

At an international conference on Avicenna in New Delhi, I delivered a short lecture on Avicenna. Sixty countries were present at the conference. There, I said, "During the seminar, some of our dear colleagues spoke of the philosophical career of Avicenna and proved that he is an original and distinguished philosopher. Some speakers focused on his scientific works, particularly *Canon* in medicine, and demonstrated that he is one of the founders of modern science. Some preferred to speak of his religious outlook, although they couldn't determine whether Avicenna is an Isma'ili, Shi'ah or Sunni. Some others proved that Avicenna is a mystic. Of course, we had already worked on this issue and our reason was the three chapters of Avicenna's *Isharat*, which bear a very deep mystical vision. I do not intend to boast of an Iranian thinker, but I would like to say that a man can simultaneously master all philosophical, scientific, religious and mystical truths in an excellent form. To put it otherwise, science is not against philosophy, as the latter is not against religion, which in turn is not against mysticism; this reality was demonstrated today by the speakers at this conference."

**Vogt:** Is mysticism taught in Iran today? If it is, how is it taught? Are there university courses on mysticism, or is it only restricted to private circles of distinguished clerics?

**Ja'fari:** We have numerous courses in theoretical mysticism in the faculties of theology and Islamic sciences. There is a society in Iran called the Islamic Society of Philosophy and Theosophy, which organizes various series of lectures on mysticism by renowned lecturers. However, practical mysticism is limited to private circles which host some few talented students. When I taught Rumi's *Masnavi* in the 60's and the 70's, even some materialists attended my lectures and said that Rumi disarms us. They only bowed before Rumi.

If one is to teach mysticism, one needs to be as careful as possible, since there are some professional considerations which have to be taken into earnest account. On the other hand, foreigners must firstly learn Islamic morality, as Islamic ethics is imbued with mysticism and can help them prepare for exposing themselves to the intense light of mystical truths. I always recommend beginners to read on Islamic morality before attending my lectures on mysticism.

**Vogt:** You spoke of "light." Does mysticism provide the man with an experience of enlightenment?

**Ja'fari:** Yes, when the soul takes the final steps along the path of fulfillment of immateriality. This is why one cannot tread this path in haste, but one needs to move forward very slowly. For example, one should firstly purify oneself of vices and then modify one's lusts. The man must adjust his relationship with the world so as to not get dazzled by divine enlightenment.

**Vogt:** Is there any occasion for an instructor or a guide here?

**Ja'fari:** Surely, the instructor knows the spiritual conditions of his pupils and can show them the best shortcut.

**Vogt:** You have Sufi centers and Dervish monasteries in Iran. What is the relationship between the mysticism which is taught in Qom with these centers?

**Ja'fari:** The priority is with mosques in Islam. A mosque is the center of spiritual ecstasy in Islam. Mosques have been prayer houses, sermon halls and even discussion rooms since the dawn of Islam up to now. Since there was no mosque in some points of world and some people wanted to live with continuous remembrance of God, some Sufi centers were built. In Islam, a mosque is *enough* for all spiritual activities. Of course, man can speak with his God in every place and at all times. It does not need any particular place, although Sufis prefer to do so in a Dervish monastery.

Now I have some questions to ask you: do you have academic courses on Islamology at your universities? How is the spiritual condition of Scandinavian countries? As you know, Sweden has no good record in this regard. Is Norway like Sweden, or does it have a better record?

**Vogt:** There is an intense interest in Islamic studies in Norway. Those students who want to obtain experiences in this field firstly take some courses in Arabic. The political situation of Islam has heightened this interest. We have young researchers who are acquainted with Islamic civilization and such intellectual schools as Sufism and Sufi poets like Jalaluddin Rumi, but we have no experts on Rumi. Regarding the rising interest, however, I think we will have such experts in coming generations.

Norway is less developed than Sweden in the study of Islamic traditions, although four or five researchers are working in these fields in universities. We have one Norwegian translation of the Quran, and the Moslem community of Norway is trying to provide other translations, too.

As for the spiritual condition of Norway, I should say that as you know, Scandinavian countries are known as free societies and there is no significant political, economic or spiritual struggle in them. However, some researchers who have recently emerged in these countries systematically devoted themselves to the study of the political issues of the Middle East and Islamic affairs. They have recognized that they should know Islamic traditions, although these studies are majorly used for political analyses of Middle Eastern affairs.

As for the spiritual condition of families, I do not know Iranian families well enough so as to make comparisons between Iran and Norway. It is said that the situation is different in Middle Eastern countries. There are various classes of citizens in every country, which have their own values and norms. As to social issues, every subject has an external and an internal aspect.

For example, many pretend to be faithful to values, but the reality may be otherwise. Social problems are discussed openly in Norway. Young people have numerous problems there. Divorce rates are high – one out of every three marriage ends in divorce. This percentage is on the rise too, and creates difficulties for children.

Moreover, there are also some problems regarding sexual relations between the woman and the man. Of course, the new generation has started to revise these relations and problems through returning to past traditions and values.

**Ja'fari:** It is never late for reclaiming primordial values, but rather some labor, time giving and honesty are required. May God help you succeed!