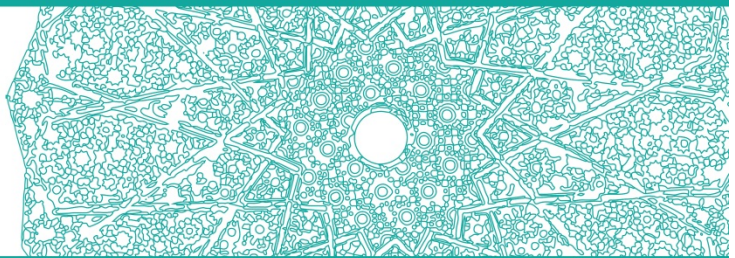


SACREDNESS OF THE OTHER:
LOVE AND HEALING



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Sacredness of the Other: Love and Healing

By Rasoul Rasoulipour

A Research Project Supported by the Fetzer Institute

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Preface

About five years ago I accidentally came across one of the Rev. Haji Ismael Dulabi's sermons on Iranian National TV. I became devotedly attached to him despite never having met him in person. I found in his words such truthfulness, radiance and charisma, the scent of the fragrance of the friends of God.

Since then, I eagerly longed for the life-story and words of that "unschooled beloved" and instructor of ethics at whose feet many professors from universities and Islamic seminaries had knelt in devotion, so that I might present it to the public, especially to my students who were in dire need of it at the outset of their life.

In 2011 John Cavadini, the director of the Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame and also the chair of the 'World Religions and Spiritualities' Council of the Fetzer Institute, proposed a conference on 'Practical Holiness' at Notre Dame and asked me to introduce a contemporary exemplar of love and forgiveness in Iran. Suddenly, the name of Ismael Dulabi sprang to mind and I mentioned it immediately. In January 2012, before my return to ND, I met with Haji Ismael's son, Mohammad Dulabi and one of his disciples, Dr. Torkashvand in the Institute of Tubaye Mohabbat (Blessings of Love) in Tehran. There I shared the issue with them and asked to learn more about Rev. Dulabi. They kindly narrated some amazing stories about the Haji's life and generously gave me two sets of the six volumes of his sermons. Later, they send me some selected phrases of his words as well. Being very impressed by that meeting, I arranged two meetings with a group of University of Tehran alumni who had established the Institute of Shams Al-Shomus (The Star of the Stars) and had held a number of gatherings and meetings at the university for youth to introduce some contemporary spiritual men in Iran, called *khakian-e aflak neshin*, "The Heavenly People on the Earth."

The conference on 'Practical Holiness' at Notre Dame was held in February 2012. Dr. Abdulrahim Gavahi who was to deliver his speech on the late Ismael Dulabi couldn't get a visa to the U.S., so I had to talk on behalf about the Haji. I was not ready at all for this mission, but, honestly speaking, I became confident that I was charged by the Haji's soul in the conference, which helped me to present his message in such a way that the audience seem to appreciate it very much!

Proposing a project to the Fetzer Institute titled: ‘Sacredness of the Other: Love and Healing’ to introduce Haji Ismael Dulabi and ‘The Heavenly People on the Earth’ and their impact on the Iranian youth, I was funded by the Fetzer to do the research project at the Institute for Church Life in Summer (June-August) 2013.

The Style of Writing

In preparing this project, I was assisted by four graduate students of mine in Tehran¹ to collect information and data about the Haji’s life. We met and interviewed the Haji’s son and some of his devotees, and also we visited twice the institute of Sham al-Shomus and received valuable information and several books were written on ‘The Heavenly People on the Earth’. We read them along with the Haji’s sermons in six volumes (all in Farsi). Afterwards, the significant and instructive points were extracted from among the dialogues, translated into English and categorized in three parts: ‘Other,’ ‘Love,’ and ‘Healing.’

I have tried in this project to show how these three crucial subjects are related and by using a number of the Quranic verses and the prophetic traditions, I have described the Haji’s method of encountering others and spreading his spiritual medicine of love, which was given by God, among his visitors. This way, the project on the late Dulabi turned out to go beyond a mere commemoration. It not only is a framework to explore some of the causes for human alienation from each other and to find ways to heal the gap between ourselves and the rest of God’s creation, but it also serves as an impetus to reconcile with God’s religion, the religion of love, by means of the Holy Qur’an and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad and his beloved Household (*Ahl al-Bayt*). It is encouraging us to unite as believers of all backgrounds and beliefs under the most basic and universal spiritual teachings of Islam in the narration of Rumi and Dulabi captured so brilliantly: the notion that mutual respect, forgiveness, and above all, love are our greatest spiritual resources. And it informing us that in Iran, such resources are more abundant than politics, oil, saffron and pistachios combined, and they represent the truest faith of the masses. Finally, the reader of this research will find out that the religion of love is not a prescription revealing

¹ I appreciate the valuable assistance of my graduate students: Maryam Haeri, Zahra Mehraban Khoo, Zeinab Amin, Ameneh Zarrabiha.

medications; rather, it is indeed a medicine that heals diseases of the heart, makes the hearts tender and radiant, and takes the spiritual seeker closer to his destination and goal.

I am grateful to the many people who have helped me to do this research and to four in particular. First of all I would like to thank Sharif Azami, program officer at the Fetzer Institute for his sincere efforts to make this project approved and funded. I also owe a debt of gratitude to John Cavadini, director of the Institute for Church Life at Notre Dame, for his generous support and guidance. My prayers and appreciations, as always, goes to my friend and Notre Dame colleague, Bradley Malkovsky, for very helpful conversations about Islamic Mysticism over an extended period. Finally, I am thankful to my Muslim brother Gene Stowe, in South Bend, for his professional editing the work and being helpful in sharpening my approach to religion of love. Of course, none of them should be held responsible for the approach to religious healing that I have taken here.

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Introduction

The tremendous human capacity to 'love' one another is, in my opinion, the strongest evidence for the existence of God and for the relationship that God intends for human beings to have with God and with each other. At the same time, the human capacity to envy, hate, aggression and violation of the dignity of 'other' humans is similarly great evidence that something is horribly wrong – human beings fail to maintain the intended relationship with God and each other. God's intention does not change, but we forgetful human beings lose sight of it and sin from time to time. This problem is at the root of humans' alienation from God and others that leaves us isolated, oblivious, suspicious and fearful.

Given this problem and its manifest effects in the world, my argument in this project is as follows:

1. Humanity's most fundamental problem is alienation from God and from other human beings, the result of each person's forgetfulness and sin.
2. Restoration must begin by recognizing the intrinsic dignity of the other.
3. Love and compassion are the spiritual medicines that can heal the disease of alienation and loneliness.
4. A substantial component of all religions is love.

Therefore:

5. 'The religion of love' can provide the medicine to heal the alienation.

This project intends to provide a framework that allows us to see the source of the problem, to explore some of the causes for human alienation from each other and creation, and to find ways to heal the gap between ourselves and the rest of God's creation. I believe that all struggles, oppressions and sufferings result from this alienation, and the substantial mission of all religions, at least the Abrahamic religions, is to heal this divide. I believe that the curative medicine for most human beings' struggles and obstacles is 'love', and this love is fed and fueled by our creator Almighty God.

*Wherever He kindles His destructive torch,
Myriads of lovers' souls are burnt therewith. (Rumi)*

Love, as a gift and grace from Him, in short, aims at communion and unity. Love is the energy that drives the quest for integration. This transforming energy must propel the common human effort to overcome alienation and achieve harmony, community and solidarity. I call the religion described in this project the ‘religion of love,’ and I am proposing it particularly as a solution for the deep-rooted alienation and division in the greatest Shia Muslim country, Iran.

“The Heavenly People on the Earth” is a group of mystic and spiritual people in Iran who over the past century have proposed that the very core of all religions is ‘sacredness’ and ‘love’ that has the power to heal people. Among them, Haji Mohammad Ismael Dulabi (1903-2002) was one of the most respected and well-known religious healers of his time in Iran. I will show some evidences and documents from the Shia Muslim sources to justify the righteousness of the mystical movement in Iran. Lifting up this exemplar would help promote love and forgiveness among Iranians, especially among the youth.

This project aims to demonstrate that there are important but neglected fruits of religion such as ‘healing’ and ‘compassion’ that people should explore and embrace. Religion is not an instrument for ruling society. Rather, it is a gift and grace from God to heal our souls and hearts by promoting and sharing love and forgiveness within society. For centuries, religious leaders and scholars have taught holy texts and scriptures, rituals and obligations, ought(s) and not-ought(s) but they have neglected the importance of mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and love. Furthermore, in countries like Iran, people are suffering from ideological separations that have created divisions between communities.

The spiritual teachings of the late Dulabi and the contemporary mystic chain in Iran have been very inspiring for youth who have never heard or seen concrete and tangible fruits of religion in unity, love and forgiveness because political Islam has ruled for all of their lives. There have been similar schools of spiritual teaching in Iran such as Sufism, but such teachings have been accused of being inauthentic or even heretical versions of Islam. However, this mystic’s love and healing movement involves people who are very pious and committed to Shiite Islam.

PART I

The Sacredness of the Other

*Your Lord said to the angels,
I will create a man from clay.
When I have shaped him and
breathed from My Rooh (spirit) into him,
bow down before him.*

(The Quran 38:71-73)

Abraham's Tent

In September 2007, during my first visit to the University of Notre Dame, I was invited for a talk at the Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Va. It was the time when they were opening a center for interfaith dialogue named "Abraham's Tent." As a Shia Muslim who is familiar with the Holy Quran, I knew about the story of Abraham's sacred guests – it is narrated in the Quran in two chapters² -- but this was the first time I noticed that the story is about 'strangers' – strangers who are 'sacred'!

[Muhammad], have you heard the story of the honored guests of Abraham? They went in to see him and said, 'Peace.' 'Peace,' he said, [adding to himself] 'These people are strangers.' (51:24-25)

Here God sets the scene that would become the prime example of how one's love ought to be directed outwardly, by his own encounter with Abraham outside his tent one hot Middle Eastern afternoon. As we examine the event and look at the manner of speech,

² Chapters: 15:51-60 and 51:24-37. The story is narrated with some slight differences in Genesis 18:4-8.

the meal provided, and the attention paid to the strangers, we are shown the extent that Abraham was willing to fully give of himself to someone else without making the typical distinctions that we make in our lives in regard to other people.

Now, in the society of this time it would not have been strange to see a host be giving and generous to a visitor – it would in fact have been “strange and disturbing” if Abraham had not attended to his guests in some way or shape, going beyond modern Western norms of simply offering a kind smile or word. What one must pay attention to is the overwhelming gifts that Abraham offers to these strangers that had appeared outside his tent. God saw in Abraham a precious love, one that was fixed on the “other” as opposed to itself; he saw a love that took the norms of its society and superseded them in every aspect.

Abraham was truly an example: devoutly obedient to God and true in faith. He was not an idolater; he was thankful for the blessings of God who chose him and guided him to a straight path. We gave him blessings in this world, and he is among the righteous in the Hereafter. (16:120-122)

Also,

Who but a fool would forsake the religion of Abraham? We have chosen him in this world and he will rank among the righteous in the Hereafter. (2:130)

Abraham was one who did not count the cost of his love for the total stranger. He adhered to that revolutionary idea that humanity was found outside of one’s close personal primary group, that it could be found in potentially dangerous strangers who were in need. God choose him as a model because he saw that the practices Abraham puts into play here reveal the “common humanity that runs deeper than customary distinctions of kin and stranger, friend and enemy.”³

³ J. Gerald Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 12-50*, Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993, p.53.

This story challenges us to redirect our love and look outwards to the “other.” Throughout Abraham’s meeting with the strangers, he is unaware that he is in the presence of the Divine. This is the point that God wants to convey to man: We should treat others as though we were relating to God because of the dignity that he has imparted to us,⁴ our common humanity, and the single family we share through Adam in blood and Abraham in faith. Islam itself takes a similar approach and sees that in this event “God is portrayed as a guest for whose visit one must always be prepared.”⁵ That preparedness refers to the unselfish self-giving love of Abraham that God encountered outside his tent, one He wishes to be replicated in each and every one of us.

Since that visit to EMU, I have been engaged with this issue. I searched through many Islamic sources and enlisted my Notre Dame students in the spring semester 2011 to do their second assigned paper as a collaborative project on “The Other as Sacred.” I have, to some extent, drawn from their presentations in this part of the project, and I would like to appreciate them by their names.⁶

In the first part of this project, I explore the causes of humanity’s alienation from God and introduce the necessity of respecting the basic equality and human dignity of every person that results from God’s creation in order to initiate restoration.

Alienation

The conflicts in our world today largely find their origin in our alienation from God and one another. This alienation is the result of human forgetfulness – the root of the Quranic word for human, *nasy*, is “forgetful one” – that produces sin.

Do not be like those who neglect God and God causes them to be oblivious to their own souls. (59:19)

⁴ According to the beginning Quranic verses, 38:72.

⁵ Snjezana Akpinar, ‘Two Responses to “Interreligious Dialogue and Spiritual Hospitality”: Hospitality in Islam,’ *Religion East & West*, 7, 2007, p.1.

⁶ Rachel M. Caron, Alison F. Climenhaga, Kevin R. Hensler, Rachael J. Banks, Erika M. Hansen, Daniel W. Palmer, Leslie M. Allen, Felipe Campos, George M. Felix, Michael J. Hur, Julian D. Kim, Sean T. O’Boyle, Connor P. Paladino, Lucia G. Tosatto,

... they have forgotten God, so he has forsaken them. (9:67)

This alienation from God, the one thing that binds all human groups most tightly, causes true alienation from one another. Without remembrance – the antidote to forgetfulness – of our relationship with the True God, who is the Ultimate Other, we fashion an idol for ourselves.

So remember Me; I will remember you... (2:152)

Those who have faith and whose hearts find peace in the remembrance of God – truly it is in the remembrance of God that hearts find peace. (13:28)

Worshipping a theological ideology, which focuses on one characteristic of God to the exclusion of another rather than opening to the infinite and expansive Mystery of the Divine Other, is also an idolatry practiced by extremists in religious traditions. Worshipping an exclusivist notion of God has implications not only for religious practice but also for global human relationships. When one's religious views cause one to disrespect the religious belief and practice of those outside their own tradition, tension naturally occurs. Instead of seeing 'the other' in their entirety, as another human person who is owed dignity and respect, it becomes easy to define them solely by how they are opposed to us. Having reduced our understanding of their identity to this one distinguishing quality, it becomes easy to objectify and manipulate them, and more difficult to establish meaningful, mutual relationships with them. Thus, even as we move away from authentic religious practice which draws us closer to God, we find ourselves moving further and further away from others in the human family. In the process, we dehumanize the other, and conflict and injustice ensue.

Abrahamic religions understand that while God is present in the world today, there is an unavoidable awareness of separation between God and humans that we must struggle to overcome throughout our time here in this world. This separation does not come from

God's being eternal and humanity's being temporal, but it results from the fact that human beings sin.

The principle components of any religion are orthodoxy and orthopraxy – what is right to believe and what is right to do – a combination that defines the lives of its adherents. In the Abrahamic religions, the relationship between orthodoxy and orthopraxy takes on a special characteristic. All three of the Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, are founded on divine revelation. Their beliefs and practices, at the core, trace back to a message or command from God Himself. According to this tradition, orthodoxy and orthopraxy have in God their source and subject. The divine revelation has also shown humans to be in a relationship with – Hebrew *b'rit* (covenant), Greek *diatheke* (covenant, testament) Arabic *misaq* (pledge) – that prescribes their behaviors and practices. This relationship between God and man is defined by mutual commitment and explicit responsibilities. These overarching principles form the framework of a society marked by harmony and peace, in which humans fulfill their responsibilities toward God through their treatment of the 'other.' Thus, these covenants signify that believers have a responsibility and duty to obey, have faith in, and revere God. Additionally, just as a son has a responsibility to care for and protect his siblings, as well as his father's livestock, land and other possessions, the believer has a responsibility to maintain and uphold the dignity of his fellow man, even if he is not a "brother in faith," but as a part of God's creation, "belonging" to God, as it were. As the Quran enjoins:

Be a community that calls for what is good, urges what is right, and forbids what is wrong: those who do this are the successful ones. Do not be like those who, after they have been given clear revelation, split into factions and fall into disputes... (3:104-110)

A sense of religious duty has been used to justify acts of violence through history, from the bloody "conversions" of the Crusades to terrorist acts on 9/11 and sectarian suicide bombings in Iraq and Pakistan. The same scriptures that reveal the duty toward the other also contain instances of seemingly sanctioned violence toward the other. The book of Joshua, for example, contains the issues of "the ban," the practice of killing all living

things in a conquered city or encampment and holy war.⁷ In the Gospel of Matthew Christ states that He has come not bring peace but the sword,⁸ and *Sura al-Tawba* (Repentance) of the Quran commands that idolaters be “killed,” “seized,” and “besieged.”⁹

However, each of these cases can be explained in context. Though all of these passages seem to advocate violence towards the other, any general application of them is an abusive misunderstanding. Of course, as history attests, such interpretations have sometimes been applied and have often colored interactions between and attitudes toward members of different faiths and ethnic groups. Yet the ‘other’ is not, for the true believer, to be regarded with fear or suspicion or murderous intent. Rather the other is of infinite value, both as a being created by God and a path towards greater relationship with Him. God does allow humans to work towards achieving this access to Him and, in essence, overcoming the alienation between Himself and humanity. Imam Ali¹⁰ advised his governor to Egypt:

And be aware that people fall under one of two categories: they are either your brother and sister in faith, or your equal in creation. (Nahjul Balaqah, “Peak of Eloquence,” letter 53)

God would not to allow humans to become misguided without making it clear that there was a path towards repairing this void between humanity and Himself. Through the examples put forth within all the Divine Scriptures, humans can become illuminated about the path that will lead them towards a reunion with God. The Quran gives an example of how to journey towards becoming closer with God and overcoming that alienation. One way to begin viewing how the Quran reveals its evidence about moving forward in a

⁷ Chapters 1-12.

⁸ Matthew 10:34-36.

⁹ Chapter 9: 6, 12-14.

¹⁰ Ali ibn Abi Talib (600-661 CE), the first Imam of Shias who was the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad. He ruled over the Islamic caliphate from 656 to 661. He was the first male who accepted Islam. Sunnis consider Ali the fourth and final of the rightly guided Caliphs. Shias consider him and his descendants the rightful successors to the Prophet. This disagreement split the Muslim community into the Sunni and Shia branches.

journey towards union with God is to see how the Quran views what is sacred and what is not. One can find such an example through the passage:

Wherever you turn, there is His Face. (2:115)

The same phrase can be seen in the Bible:

Behold me; here am I. (Isaiah 65:1)

These passages show that, rather than alienation, wherever one turns, God is reflected. This involves seeing the sacredness of the other and understanding that Allah is the source of all existence and all cosmic and human qualities as well as the End to Whom all things return. The Qur'an is pointing out very clearly that God is not simply sitting on His throne in heaven, but is present wherever you look; because of His all-encompassing presence, one must treat what one sees with the respect they would show God.

Religion, as some philosophers of religion have defined it, is but a "diagnosis and cure."¹¹ A religion proposes a diagnosis (an account of the basic problem) and a cure (how to decisively solve that problem) – one basic problem shared by every human person and one fundamental solution that, however adapted to different cultures and cases, is essentially the same across the board. Religions differ insofar as their diagnosis and cures differ. For example some religions are monotheistic and some are not. Hence some diagnoses are offered in terms of alienation from God and cures are presented that concern removing that alienation, while other diagnoses and cures make no reference to God. According to the Abrahamic traditions, our sickness is sin and the cure is God's mercy and forgiveness, variously tied to our action and repentance or not, as the Quran says,

¹¹ See: Keith Yandel, *Philosophy of Religion*, Routledge, 1999. Regarding 'diagnosis and cure' in some of the non-Abrahamic religions, Yandel says: "According to Advaita Vedanta, the sickness is our ignorance of our being identical with Brahman and the cure is gaining this knowledge. According to Jainism, the sickness is that we think we are ignorant and dependent and the cure is learning that we are omniscient and existentially independent. According to Theravada Buddhism, our sickness is that we take ourselves to be enduring substances and the cure is learning that we are only transitory states." (p.33)

Those who remember God and implore forgiveness for their sins if they do something shameful or wrong themselves [by transgression] – who forgives sins but God? – and who never knowingly persist in doing wrong. (3:135)

So sin can be considered that which causes the separation of humanity and individual humans from God. This is actually a vicious cycle – sin separates us from God, separation makes sin more likely, more sin increases the separation.

Stranger

Humans are very social creatures. We enjoy being around friends, family, and people who share similar traits and values with us. For this reason, we tend to form groups that establish our place in society. However, the unfortunate effect of forming these ‘in-groups’ is that they necessarily define ‘out-groups.’ People in these ‘out-groups’ are often shunned by those who are considered part of the ‘in-group,’ sometimes with verbal abuse, and even occasionally with physical violence. The people in these ‘out-groups’ are seen as ‘strangers,’ ‘aliens,’ and ‘others,’ designations that can be hard to shake and that can persist down through the generations, at least until someone finally chooses to conform to what the ‘in-group’ wants them to do or to be. History is filled with examples of people, both in the East and in the West, who have suffered discrimination because they were relegated to an alien status. Interestingly enough, as the world has gotten smaller through the advent of modern technology and more and more people consider themselves to be ‘world citizens,’ the number of ‘aliens’ that are seen as outside of the ‘in-group’ has increased. There is no simple solution to this problem, unfortunately, as humans always seem to form such groups at the expense of others.

In the Quran, human beings are not separated into categories based on race or language. There is no mention in Surah 49 of the importance of one’s lineage or ancestry, but according to piety – those who have high ranks with Allah versus those who are sinful and disgraced in the eyes of God – for we are all created by God.

People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognize one another. In God's eyes, the most honoured of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all knowing, all aware.
(49:13)

Also,

And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the difference of your languages and colors. Verily, in that are indeed signs for men of sound knowledge.
(30:22)

However, it is important to remember that the relationship of alienation of people from each other and from God is not simply the cause of misunderstanding and differences in language. It is deeply rooted at the heart of humanity's relationship to itself and everything else. Alienation can be caused by struggle, oppression or suffering, and that is where we find ourselves today. We must realize that conflicts and "otherness" can truly cause alienation from ourselves, our fellow human beings, and God, as well as the rest of His creation.

We cannot discuss the word "stranger" without mentioning *The Stranger*, Albert Camus' brilliant novel. *The Stranger* captures the story of a man who does not feel connected to God and cannot see his purpose in this life. While some contend that Meursault, the narrator, may suffer from mental illness, more evidence suggests that he suffers from an inability to feel or give compassion. Meursault and his story demonstrate the potential for extreme individualism and violence as a result of discrimination and loneliness.

In his article "Camus' Stranger: His Act of Violence," Julian Stamm attempts to identify the reasoning behind Meursault's violent act. Before the murder, Meursault tends to choose to be neutral; instead of answering questions or facing tough situations, he passively avoids them. When given the opportunity to commit a violent act, he does so. Stamm concludes about this act, "Camus clearly implies that this can happen to you and to

me, that such an act could be repeated over and over again through all time.”¹² As Camus may imply, there is certainly evidence for the human capacity to commit heinous acts of violence against each other. Perhaps, Meursault’s act is the radical potential for our free will to go completely awry. Each human is endowed with free will, and Meursault’s action demonstrates that there must be a counterbalance to our free will.

Karen Armstrong presents another choice for Meursault in her TED Talk “The Charter for Compassion.” She believes that compassion for all people is the gateway to peace and acceptance of others in our world. Through a discourse of personal history and extensive research on various traditions, Armstrong presents her thesis: “Because in compassion, when we feel with the other, we dethrone ourselves from the center of our world and put another person there. And once we get rid of ego, then we’re ready to see the divine. And in particular, every single one of the major world traditions has highlighted - has said - and put at the core of their tradition what’s become known as the Golden Rule.”¹³

How could we expect to overcome that conflict as a society when the conflict can barely be overcome on a person-to-person basis? Armstrong’s solution to the conflicts in our world is simple; treat others the way you want to be treated. The disconnection between Camus and Armstrong directly relates to the larger issue: how do we avoid the feeling of otherness and create a connection with God? Armstrong argues that we do that through treating everyone with compassion.

¹² Stamm, Julian L. ‘Camus’ Stranger: His Act of Violence.’ *American Imago*. 26.3, 1969: Fall, p.283.

¹³ Karen Armstrong, “The Charter for Compassion.” Monterey, CA, Feb. 2008. (TED. 25 March). See it at: http://www.ted.com/talks/karen_armstrong_makes_her_ted_prize_wish_the_charter_for_compassion.html.

The Other

Apparently Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) was the first philosopher to talk about ‘the other’ by naming God as “The Wholly Other.”¹⁴ Perceiving God for him was the numinous experience that evokes fear and trembling, a quality of mysticism, the tendency to attract, fascinate and compel. The numinous experience also has a personal quality, in that the person feels that they are in communion with a wholly other.

Martin Buber (1878-1965) and more recently Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) also speak about ‘the Other.’ Buber coins the ‘I-Thou’ engagement¹⁵ and Levinas talks about the ‘Face-to-Face’ relation.¹⁶ Here, I would like to deal with these two theses:

The book *I and Thou* by Martin Buber philosophically attempts to describe how humans can love others. We constantly categorize each other, creating distance between us. Meursault, the main character of Camus’s *The Stranger*, never makes a connection to another being, neither human nor divine, but Buber’s ideas offer the proper way to do that. The underlying philosophy of humanity’s mode of engaging the world in Buber’s book is an examination of humanity’s existence that entails Meursault’s difficulty in showing compassion towards others. He expounds upon Meursault’s inability to connect with others is a staple problem of modern society and offers a solution in the third section of *I and Thou*. Buber addresses the twofold mode of humanity’s relationship with the world. Explained through the two terms I-It and I-You, Buber describes the modes of engagement that distinguishes the I’s in both expressions. The I in the I-It relationship relies on the experience of the objectification of the surrounding world; the I in the I-You relationship is purely relational with the world. Humans’ twofold mode of existence is further elaborated in part two where modern society has shaped man to choose one mode over the other. In a predominantly I-It society, Buber argues, man feels alienated because of the emptiness

¹⁴ See: Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, Oxford University Press, 1936, p.28.

¹⁵ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufman, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970.

¹⁶ Emanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, Duquesne University Press, 1985, p.95.

Also, I’d like to add that it was only near the completion of my research on this project that I discovered very inspiring multi-year project on encountering the other as stranger as represented by people of other religions. The project name is: “The Guestbook Project: Hosting the Stranger,” which is “an ongoing project ongoing artistic, academic, and multi-media experiment in hospitality,” sponsored by Boston College. It is available online: <http://www.bc.edu/schools/cas/guestbook/>

brought upon by the lack of relation with the world. Ultimately, Buber offers a solution in part three that seeks to reform society into a better community by acknowledging the necessity of encountering God.

While human encounter with others may be exclusive, Buber argues that in relation to God “unconditional exclusiveness and unconditional inclusiveness are one.”¹⁷ It is exclusive in that we relate to the You in such a way that we view the universe through God. At the same time, the inclusiveness of the “I-God” relationship is brought upon the fact that in relating to God, we are relating to His entire universe.

Nevertheless, the same feeling of actually loving another and potentially loving another still exists for the I. Not only is God eternal because of His inability to be reduced to an It, but the relation as both exclusive and inclusive fosters the actualization of God within the world and makes Him the eternal You.

Through the combined effort of multiple people who have encountered God, Buber argues, societal reform from a world of I-It to I-You can solve the feelings of emptiness and anxiety. Finding God can give meaning back to life.

Emmanuel Levinas has a different approach to describing our relationship with the other. For him, the clearest and most potent revelation that I am not everything—that everything does not belong to me, and that my consciousness does not encompass everything—is the face of the Other. “Other” here (especially when capitalized) means “someone else,” “the other person,” “the person I encounter.” If it were not for the face of the other person, I might indeed maintain the illusion that everything I experience and enjoy (food, landscapes, things) is indeed mine. But once I encounter the Other, I realize that there is something absolutely and irreducibly apart from myself, and that the world I enjoy and seem to possess also belongs to the Other; my possession and sovereignty are contested. There is a religious dimension to his thought—ultimately the Other, who is calling us to service and responsibility, is God. He argues, however, that God does not do this directly, but rather through the face of the Other— i.e., through the neighbor (“near

¹⁷ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufman, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970, p.127.

one"), whoever it may be, that I encounter—as well as through scripture (e.g., the Bible) and through "testimony," that is, the response within ourselves that (even before we have a chance to analyze or choose it) is aroused by the Other.¹⁸

***The Other as My Equal*¹⁹**

Radical conceptions treat the Other as identical to the Self or entirely the opposite. With the recognition that “conceptualizing activity is a highly suspect process, [since] conceptualizations of the Other do violence to it by forcing alterity to ‘fit’ within predetermined mental structures that deprive the Other of its own unique identity,”²⁰ I suggest that the most helpful step to take is to avoid the assumption that ‘the Self’ means the known and ‘the Other’ means the unknown. Such a perspective leads to misguided statements such as “the Other is unknown, therefore...” and similar generalizations. Since all conceptualizations rely, at least on a base level, on certain primitive assumptions, I do not attempt to formulate a proof, but merely offer an alternative perspective to many of the radical positions. I propose that alterity can best be understood through a paradox: in recognizing the unknown within ourselves, we unite with the Other and their unknown qualities. The search for satisfaction in God captures this paradox.

Since this paper approaches alterity through a religious perspective, it is important to recognize that religious traditions are not constrained within any single intellectual paradigm. That is, Christianity emerged prior to the totalizing rationality of Modernity and still exists through post-modernity. To view such a pre-modern, yet living, religion properly, we must do our best to disassociate Christianity, Islam, or other traditions from any one intellectual era or paradigm.

The process of understanding the self and the other is comparative. Through focusing on similarities and, more importantly, differences between others and ourselves,

¹⁸ See: *Face to Face with Levinas*, Richard A. Cohen (ed.), SUNY Series in Philosophy, 1986, p. 27.

¹⁹ Borrowing the term from Imam Ali in *Nahjul Balaqah*, letter 53.

²⁰ Marsha A. Hewitt, ‘Alterity and Ethics,’ *Religion* 27 (1997): pp. 101-105. *Science Direct*.

we form identities. Our descriptions of others and ourselves involve around characteristics and other forms of distinction to emphasize how we are like or unlike each other. This focus not only defines how we view others, but also how we view ourselves. The entire system of descriptions turns on what separates one person from another. To describe myself as a citizen of the world might have a nice ring to it, but it doesn't give a customs officer any information he might need to know. For me to be able to differentiate myself as an individual, I must be able to use words that set me apart from others. In this sense, the Self is not inherently known, but merely created relative to those around it. That is, perspectives on what make us each unique do inherently that: define us in comparison with others. In this sense, our understanding of ourselves comes not from within, but from the outside.

Due to this weak ability to understand the Self, Jonathon Smith argues that the Other becomes "most problematic when he is too-much-like-us ...The problem is not alterity, but similarity."²¹ That is, since the definition of the Self comes from comparisons to others, defining the Self as unique becomes problematic when the Other is not obviously so different. This tension, Smith asserts, creates identity issues. Curtis Freeman, however, offers a powerful alternative to Smith's assertions. He writes that an account of alterity is needed wherein "otherness is not simply the mirror image of the regnant ideology but something radically other. Only from such a standpoint of radical otherness can there be the leverage to subvert the structures of representation and domination."²²

I suggest that such radical positions fall under the category of "totalizing rationality." We encounter the unknown constantly; we learn about foreign cultures on television, meet new people in the classroom or at work, and we recognize new thoughts and emotions inside ourselves. The unknown is not merely foreign cultures or separate religions. Through recognizing that the known and unknown are not merely the Self and the Other, respectively, alterity takes on a new dimension. While the Other may indeed

²¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, 'What a Difference a Difference Makes' in *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Christians, Jews and "Others" in Late Antiquity*, Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs. (eds.), Chico: Scholars Press, 1985, p. 47.

²² Curtis W. Freeman, 'Alterity and its Cure,' *Cross Currents*, Dec. 2009, p. 404-441.

have qualities we do not understand, recognizing the unknown in both the Other and the Self leads to a commonality between the two.

Edith Wyschogrod powerfully argues that, “a moral theory that promotes the conditions of agency for others betrays alterity in that it presupposes the other as a ‘second self’ to whom the conditions of agency are to be extended.”²³ Such a radical position, however, ignores the fact that including ‘the unknown’ as a quality of both the Self and the Other, does not actually make any presuppositions about the Other. Such radical positions are untenable insofar as they remove the possibility of any possible commonality between the Self and the Other. Indeed, Wyschogrod’s thesis asserts that the only means of connecting with the Other are through entirely rejecting the Self. Marsha Hewitt correctly notes that “such a view is not only politically problematic as a prescription for daily conduct; it is also unsatisfactory. How can one possibly see another, feel another’s need and suffering, if one has no sense of self that allows one to feel pain and suffering in ways that allow for basic human empathy toward the other’s situation?”²⁴

Whereas the alterity theorists I have cited focus on whether or not we can extend the traits we find in ourselves to the Other, I suggest that we ought view the dilemma from the opposite perspective. The question changes from “Which of my qualities can I ascribe to the Other?” to “Are there traits in myself that I do not understand even as I condemn the unknown of the Other?” In this new perspective, the goal of discourse and establishing identities is not to control or be able to manipulate. Rather, engagement leads into greater insights about both the Other and ourselves that move towards unity. The drive for power through knowledge turns against itself when one recognizes the Unknown inherent in himself. This paradox, that through our undefined or recognized qualities we are the same as the Other, leads to true unity. Indeed, proper religion itself embodies this beautiful uncertainty. Even as God is the ultimate Other, unknowable and transcendent, the call of religion is to experience satisfaction and hope in Him. Religion calls us both toward and away from ourselves through embracing the unknown both in God and ourselves. There is

²³ Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 71.

²⁴ Hewitt, p. 103.

a unity in building community around the unknown. We are in a world that, because of sin, constantly fails to achieve its aim, but at the same time we are creatures of a God who does not fail.

Lisette Josephides offers “moments” of this paradox in action. She explains that the Pauline ecclesia in Christianity, for example, was a “community of foreigners, founded on missionary activity undertaken in the name of charity (caritas, ‘love’) and as a ‘means of summoning people of goodwill against xenophobia and racism’ (Kristeva 1993: 23). The ecclesia is made up of ‘uprooted wanderers’ assimilated to a group new to all (1993: 22).”²⁵ She continues through the ‘moment’ of “the exodus of Jews from Egypt and Ruth's marriage to Boaz (whose children founded the lineage of kings) reminds us that ‘divine revelation requires a disparity, the welcoming of a radical otherness, the acknowledging of foreignness.”²⁶ In each of these moments we encounter the assimilation of foreignness into the Self. I disagree with Josephides, however, on the assimilation of the Other. Since the Self is not entirely known, the Other need not transition from unknown into known to become my brother or sister. I may indeed welcome the foreignness of the Other, but she must not assimilate into the known in order to become welcome.

Obviously, paradoxes cannot be entirely elucidated. By their very nature they are convoluted and resist explanation. Yet through at least recognizing the paradox of alterity, I hope that the suppressing rationality of radical schemes might give way to a moderate understanding of otherness. The known and unknown exist in both the Other and the Self. Ironically, part of the ‘known’ in both the Self and the Other is the fact that each includes the ‘unknown.’ In this, the Other is my equal. Through an understanding of the utter transcendence and otherness of God we can better respect the Other and seek to move beyond the negative alterity which divides us and creates schisms.

²⁵ Lisette Josephides, ‘Cosmopolitanism as the existential condition of humanity’ in *Social Anthropology*, 2010, 18: p. 391.

²⁶ Ibid.

Conclusion

If the human problem is alienation and the solution is reconciliation, the first step is recognizing that alienation and its effects, then choosing to view the Other as one with equal dignity and deserving respect. The otherness of the other is not the problem. We can choose to treat the other as an object, an inferior and an enemy, or we can choose to treat the other as an equal actor in our shared space and time who deserves the same esteem, rights and privileges that we desire for ourselves. Such a stance does not require or imply love or special commitment – indeed, it is the recognition of a not-special commitment, a commitment owed to every human being, that can become the arena of our activity and become a foundation for love.

The process of moving from alienation to relationship, compassion, and hospitality first of all involves a process of critical self-reflection, of learning to see our unconscious complicity in the structures and prejudices which alienate us from one another. The hoped-for fruit of this critical self-reflection is an awakening to the value of the other and the corresponding discovery of the capacity for relationship with this other, born from the acceptance of the other in their very otherness. The Other need not transformation from unknown into known to become my brother or sister. I may indeed accept and respect the otherness of the Other.

Acceptance and respect for the other, even acknowledgement of duties toward the other as a fellow human being, is a necessary step toward curing the alienation that afflicts humanity. It is necessary, but not sufficient. This recognition is the precondition for love and compassion, a disposition which in turn leads us to extend ourselves in hospitality, welcoming the stranger in our midst as friend and honored guest. And it is in extending hospitality that we mysteriously meet God, face to face. We consider love and compassion in Part 2.

PART II LOVE

*Of One Essence is the Human Race,
Thusly has Creation put the Base.
One Limb impacted is sufficient,
For all Others to feel the Mace.
The Unconcern'd with Others' Plight,
Are but Brutes with Human Face.*
(Gulistan-e Saadi)

The most fundamental problem of humanity, as we elaborated in Part One, is alienation from God and from other human beings. According to the Quran, this alienation and separation is affected by human forgetfulness and sin, and restoration begins by recognizing the intrinsic dignity and sacredness of the Other. By the act of creation, God has given every person basic equality and dignity that must be respected. The story of Abraham's Tent teaches us how we are obliged to redirect our love and look outwards to the Other. The amazing point in Abraham's story is his being unaware that he is in the presence of the Divine when he was dealing with the strangers. Abraham, as the best model for the "people of book," confirms that we should treat others as though we were relating to God. For the dignity, our common humanity, and the single family we share through Adam in blood and Abraham in faith, we have to prepare ourselves for an unselfish self-giving love to others.

Religions, specifically the Abrahamic ones, work as the bridge to fill the gap – resulting from our forgetfulness and sin – between God and human beings. The bridge we are talking about is none other than spreading love, compassion and forgiveness in our society. These are the substantial gifts from our creator and the basic obligation and practice that all religions demand of their followers to heal man's annihilation, and loneliness.

Love as the main source of the energy that drives the quest for integration, transformation is the spiritual instrument that leads us to abandon all notions of severe

dualism, division and rivalry. Love is the only way to truly overcome the pain of anxiety and alienation in our lives: to attain the authentic life, to find the way back home, to get closer to God. Love brings to our souls permanent peace and true happiness.

We already explored the initial answer to the question of how we overcome our spiritual obstacles. The answer we offered in the first part was very simple: “seeing others as our equals,” recalling the Golden Rule: “treating others as we want to be treated.” But this answer is at a very humanistic or moral level; it is necessary but not sufficient; it is not healing. We need a higher and divine answer to this question. I believe that the final answer is: “love others, for God loves us.” But what is love and where does love come from?

What Is Love?

Love, as some scholars have confirmed, cannot be defined, though its traces can be described. It is a fire that can only be known if it gives off sparks.²⁷ Despite the large number of authors who have written on divine and human love, the very presence of a vast literature on Divine Love in nearly every Islamic language, from Arabic and Persian to Turkish and Swahili, as well as most of the local languages of India and Southeast Asia, is the best external sign of the significance of the dimension of love in the inner life of Islam. This tradition finally led to Ibn Arabi²⁸ and Rumi²⁹, who are considered the greatest Muslim mystical figures. Ibn Arabi, who lived a generation before Rumi and represents the highest theoretician of the Islamic spirituality says:

Love has no definition through which its essence can be known. Rather, it is given descriptive and verbal definitions, nothing more. Those who define love have not known it, those who have not tasted it by drinking it down have not known it, and

²⁷ See: William Chittick, *Suffism*, Oneworld Publishing, Oxford, 2008, p.77; also, Seyyed Hussein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam*, HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2004, p. 214.

²⁸ Also called Muhyiddin, the Revivifier of the Faith, was born in Spain (1164) and died in Syria (1240). Called within the Sufi tradition the Shayikh al-Akbar, the Greatest Master, and seen as its ultimate exemplar of esoteric Knowledge. He was the author of approximately three hundred books. The best known and doubtless most important of these are the *Fusus al-Hikam*, The Bezels of Wisdom, and the enormous *Futuh al-Makkiyya*, The Meccan Illuminations.

²⁹ Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Balkhi also called *Mowlana*, My Master, was born in Balkh, Persia (1207) and died in Konya, Turkey (1273). Rumi composed over 70,000 verses of intoxicating poetry in Persian language, which are compiled in his two masterpieces *Maṭnawī Manawī* (Spiritual Couplets) and *Divan-e Shams-e Tabrizi*, named in honor of his master Shams from Tabriz, Iran.

*those who say that they have been quenched by it have not known it, for love is drinking without quenching.*³⁰

Rumi, the supreme troubadour of Divine Love, who calls love “our Plato and Galen,”³¹ is in complete agreement with Ibn Arabi on this point and believes that “when the pen comes to the question of describing what love is, it breaks in half.”³² According to him, only the lover knows what love is:

*Someone asked, “What is it to be a lover?”
I replied, “Don’t ask me about these meanings –
When you become like me, you’ll know;
When it calls you, you’ll tell its tale.”*³³
*What is it to be a lover? To have perfect thirst.
So let me explain the water of life,
I’ll be silent and I won’t explain it,
I’ll do whatever cannot be described.*³⁴

On the divine level, love can be called the motive force for God’s creative activity.³⁵ Love runs through the vein of the universe and, like compassion, is inseparable from existence. There is no realm of existence where love does not manifest itself in some way. One can even say that, metaphysically speaking, the gravitational attraction of physical bodies for each other is a particular instance of the universal principle of love operating on the level of physical reality. God created the world through love, so love produces the multiplicity that fills the universe. He never ceases loving the creatures, so He never ceases creating them, and this keeps the universe in a perpetual state of transformation and flux. All things are infused with love, because God’s attribute of love brings them into existence

³⁰ *Futuhāt* II 111.12; cf. II 325.13, translated in W. C. Chittick, ‘The Divine Roots of Human Love,’ *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society* XVII, 1995, pp. 55–78 (p. 57).

³¹ Claudius Galenus (AD 129–c. 200/c. 216), better known as Galen of Pergamon (modern-day Bergama, Turkey), was a prominent Roman (of Greek ethnicity) physician, surgeon and philosopher.

³² *Divan-e Shams*, ghazal 1509.

³³ *Ibid.*, ghazal 2733.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1656.

³⁵ Chittick, *Suffism*, p. 214.

and motivates all their activities. Rumi frequently points to love as God's motive for creation:

*Love makes the ocean boil like a pot,
love grinds mountains down to sand.
Love splits the heaven in a hundred pieces,
love shakes the earth with a mighty shaking.
.... If not for pure love,
why would I give existence to the spheres?³⁶*

Ibn Arabi explains the meaning of God's love while commenting on the Quranic verse, "And He is with you wherever you are" (57:4):

God's love for human beings means that He never lets them out of His sight. God's love for His servants is not qualified by origin or end, His existence has no first point, so His love for His servants has no first point.³⁷

Rumi provides many parallel accounts of God's love that courses through all things. But his perspective focuses more on practice than theory, so he constantly reminds his readers of their own situation. Here is one of his ghazals:³⁸

*It is incumbent on lovers to seek the Friend,
flowing like floods on face and head to His river.
He himself does the seeking, and we are like shadows.
All our talking and speaking are the words of the Friend.
Sometimes we rejoice like water running in His stream,
sometimes we're trapped like water in His jug.³⁹*

Ibn Arabi and Rumi both constantly remind their readers that love for any creature can only be love for God. Only ignorance veils people from perceiving what they love. So the

³⁶ *Mathnavi*, book V, section 115.

³⁷ *Futuhāt* II, 329.5; SDG 22.

³⁸ The ghazal is a poetic form consisting of rhyming couplets and a refrain, with each line sharing the same meter.

³⁹ *Divan-e Shams*, ghazal 442.

cosmos is all lover and beloved, and all of it goes back to Him. In the same way, no one is worshiped but Him, for no worshiper worships anything without imagining divinity within it. Otherwise, he would not worship it. Thus God says,

Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him. (17:23)

All love is in truth love for God. Love is good because it is divine, but it remains a deceptive veil so long as lovers do not recognize its true object. Love is an attribute of God, who has no needs –love for anything else is a metaphor. Love is an ever-present reality, but it tends to be dispersed and dissipated because people fall in love with the Beloved's reflections.

*Love makes bitter sweet,
love turns copper to gold,
Love makes dregs into wine,
love turns pain into healing,
Love brings the dead to life,
love makes kings into slaves.⁴⁰*

Therefore, once the lovers see things clearly, they find that they love everything in creation, because all of creation displays God's beauty, and their own love displays God's love. As Rumi puts it,

*The joy and heartache of lovers is He,
the wages and salary for service is He.
If they were to gaze on other than the Beloved,
how could that be love? That would be idle fancy.
Love is that flame which, when it blazes up,
burns away all except the everlasting Beloved.⁴¹*

Love, in short, aims at communion, union, unity between lover and beloved. *Tawhid*, the main principle of Islam, is the assertion of oneness and unity of God, but it is only an

⁴⁰ *Mathnawi*, book II, section 31.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, V, 29.

assertion, not the reality. Love is the energy that drives the quest for integration. The assertion of unity and the transforming energy must work together to overcome disjunction and disarray, to achieve togetherness and harmony, to actualize oneness and union. Tawhid provides the orientation, love the force. Without tawhid, love is dispersed and scattered; without love, tawhid is empty talk.⁴²

How Does Love Work?

The love, according to Muslim mystics, thus symbolized is the emotional element in religion, the rapture of the seer, the courage of the martyr, the faith of the saint, the only basis of moral perfection and spiritual knowledge. Practically, it is self-renunciation and self-sacrifice, the giving up of all possessions--wealth, honor, will, life, and whatever else men value--for the Beloved's sake without any thought of reward. "Love," says Rumi, "is the remedy of our pride and self-conceit; the physician of all our infirmities. Only he whose garment is rent by love becomes entirely unselfish."⁴³ That is why some mystics proudly proclaim that their religion is founded on unselfishness.⁴⁴

Therefore, love is the best spiritual medicine to remove the main obstacle and the barrier that prevents us from reaching heaven and sacrificing our life for our brethren's sake; for, in them we see our Beloved face.⁴⁵

Then, to answer the question, 'How does love work?' we should say that love is the only instrument to cure the sickness of alienation and loneliness by limiting "self." We can escape from the prison of our restricting selfishness by love. We can have our soul flourish like a flower, or transform it like a butterfly. It is worth noting that transcending the individual self's boundaries and contours are a goal of religious quest in general. Spirituality in Islam can be characterized as the way of purifying this lower self (ego) of its reprehensible traits, while adorning it instead with what is praiseworthy, whether or not this process of cleansing and purifying the heart is in time rewarded by esoteric knowledge of God. Likewise in other religions, such as Advaita Vedanta, the end of the religious quest

⁴² W. Chittick, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/william-c-chittick-phd/the-goal-of-love_b_776173.html, Accessed date 29/06/13.

⁴³ Ibid., book I, 1.

⁴⁴ See Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*, Routledge, Kegan Paul, London, 1914, p. 110.

⁴⁵ Referring to this popular verse of the Quran: "Wherever you turn, there is His Face." (2:115)

is to expand the self to include all of being, and in Theravada Buddhism, it is to eliminate the self, and in theism it is to merge with the divine.⁴⁶

The essence of “love” for Rumi is “sacrifice.” A true lover is the one who is eager to make great sacrifice for the sake of her beloved. As soon as you experience love, your way of being transforms drastically. Before love, you knowingly or unknowingly consider yourself as the measure of everything, the center of the universe. However, as soon as you fall in love, the configuration of your “self” will be changed. To form a love-bond requires you to become open toward the other, and if necessary, to sacrifice your own well-being for the sake of the beloved. And this openness expands the boundaries of your “self.” The center of your existence moves from “I” to “beloved” or “the Other.” Rumi sometimes calls this transformation “death prior to death”⁴⁷ or “death in the light.”⁴⁸ Through love one finds the opportunity to detach oneself from one’s own self, and attach it to the beloved. Here God reveals Himself in the space between two human beings. As many Muslim Sufis have claimed: The path toward God passes through the care for fellow human beings.

Therefore, love is not only the great teacher of altruism, but also it shakes the boundaries of “self” and creates a unique opportunity to perceive the holy through your beloved. However, this vocation is not easy!

Rumi has thousands of verses on the interplay between separation and union, hope and fear, sobriety and drunkenness, annihilation and subsistence, pain and joy. This is the dialectic of love. No love is possible without the ups and downs inherent to the created realm. He constantly invites his readers to leap into the fray:

*How much the Companion made me suffer until this work
settled into the eye’s water and the liver’s blood!
A thousand fires and smokes and heartaches all named “Love”!
A thousand pains and regrets and afflictions all named “Companion”!
If you are the enemy of your own self, come – in the name of God!
Welcome to the soul’s sacrifice! Welcome to a pitiful slaughter!
Look at me – I see Him worth a hundred deaths like this.*

⁴⁶ See: Keith Yandel, p. 33.

⁴⁷ *Divan-e Shams*, ghazal 941.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, ghazal 1133.

*I neither fear nor flee from the Heart-keeper's slaying.
Like the Nile's water, love's torture has two faces –
water for its own folk, blood-drinking for others.
If aloes and candles didn't burn, what good would they be?
Aloes would be the same as the trunk of a thorn-bush.
If battles had no striking of swords and spears and arrows,
how would a distard be different from Rostam⁴⁹ the hero?
Rostam finds the sword sweeter than sugar,
he sees the arrows raining down better than coins of gold.
This lion takes her prey with two hundred coquetries –
the prey runs in desire for her wave after wave.
The slain prey keeps on screaming in the midst of the blood –
"For God's sake, kill me again!"
The eyes of the slain gaze at the living –
"O heedless and frozen, come, don't scratch your heads!"
Silence, silence! Love's allusions are upside-down –
too much speaking keeps the meanings hidden.⁵⁰*

Love in the Quran

The Quran speaks of love in a number of key verses that clarify its essential role. All the great lovers recognized that what stirs up love for God in the first place is God's love for human beings. People could not love God if He did not already love them. God created people out of love for them. The most often cited Quranic proof text for this hierarchy of love is the verse: "He loves them, and they love Him." (5:54)

First God loves human beings, then human beings love God. Once they come to love Him, His love for them will increase to the extent that they follow the Prophet, purify and cultivate their souls, remember God ceaselessly, and become perfect human beings.

⁴⁹ Rostam or Rustam is the epic hero of the story, 'Rostam and Sohrab', part of the nationalistic Persian epic of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (written between c. 977 and 1010 AD).

⁵⁰ *Divan-e Shams*, ghazal 1138.

Two words have been used in the Quran to define the relationship between God and humans; the word “*hubb*” (love) and “*wodd*” (affection). The word *hubb* and its derivatives are mentioned more than fifty times in the Quran. Love links humankind to God, human beings to one another, and the individual to earthly life and its pleasures. As far as God’s love is concerned, it focuses not only on persons but also on their qualities or their actions. According to the Quran, God takes the initiative in everything, and his love and affection anticipate that of human beings:

He will cause people to come whom he will love and who will love him. (5:54)

One of God’s Names is *al-Wadud*, Affectionate (11:90, 85:14), and there is a certitude for Muslims that God is all-loving, as He is all-compassionate and all-forgiving, as stated in the verses,

Surely my Lord is All- Merciful, All-Love. (11:90)

He is the All-Forgiving, the All-Loving. (85:14)

But the Lord of Mercy will give affection to those who believe and do righteous deed. (19:96)

In fact, the very existence of beings is nothing but their invocation of God’s Names, and the universe itself is nothing but the consequence of the breathing upon the archetypal realities of all beings in the Divine Intellect of the Breath of the Compassionate (*nafas al-Rahman*). It is through His Name *al-Rahman*, which means the Infinitely-Good and also Merciful, that the universe has come into being, and “There is nothing but that it hymns His praise.” (17:44)

God has made Himself committed to this mercy: “Your Lord has taken it on Himself to be merciful.” (6:12, 54) and this mercy is not confined between Him and believers only; His unbounded mercy and love extend even to those who fall into error and sin, as the Quran confirms:

Say, My Servants who have harmed yourselves by your own excess, do not despair of God’s mercy. God forgives all sins: He is truly the Most Forgiving, the Most Merciful. (39:53)

Even this love and affection may be made between the Prophet and his enemies, too:

God may still bring about affection between you and your present enemies, God is all powerful, God is most forgiving and merciful. (60:7)

Love, in the sense of affection and compassion, thus appears as a movement by God towards all humans, regardless of their faith or race, that is reciprocated, and then a movement by a human being towards his fellow creature. God loves those who act for the best (2:195, 3:134,148, 5:13,93) or the just (5:42, 49:9, 60:8), in such a manner that whoever performs acts lovable to God attracts the divine love to himself, as the Quran teaches:

Those men who love to purify themselves and God loves those who purify themselves. (9:108)

These passages giving strong expression to the love between God and humans or between spouses thus occur infrequently in the Quran. The bond between two hearts is made by God, as usual Islamic formulas of the marriage state, and the love of one spouse for the other is an earthly reflection of the love of the soul for God, although the male and female forms of spirituality are not the same. This intimate bond between the male and female in marriage is indicated in the verse, "... They [your wives] are raiment for you and ye are raiment for them." (2:187)

Each spouse is raiment for the other not only in the sense that he or she covers the intimate life and even faults of the other from public view as our clothing covers our bodies, but also in the sense that the raiment is the thing closest to our body. Husband and wife should be also the closest being to each other.

Another of His signs is that He created spouses from among yourselves for you to live with in tranquility: He ordained love and kindness between you. There truly are signs in this for those who reflect. (30:21)

On the other hand, God does not love qualities that clash with his nor does he love types of behavior contrary to his law, such as shown by the "unjust" (42:40), the

“transgressors” (7:55) or the “conceited,” the “boastful”, those who are miserly, and who tell other people to be miserly (57:23-24). The term love in the Quran is used much more often for that which occupies the human heart first and foremost – passion and worldly goods: “And you love wealth with a passion.” (89:20)

Humans are inevitably pushed to the desire for things and persons rather than to the things or persons themselves:

The love of desirable things is made alluring for men - women, children, gold and silver treasures piled up high, horses with fine markings, livestock, and farmland – these may be the joys of this life, but God has the best place to return to. (3:14)

The opposition between the love of things and the return to God is contained in an element of the quranic discourse that places faith in opposition to other attitudes (such as hypocrisy or disbelief). Thus the love of God is opposed to the worst of sins:

Even so, there are some who choose to worship others besides God as rivals to Him, loving them with the love due to God, but the believers have greater love for God. If only the idolaters could see – as they will see when they face the torment – that all power belongs to God, and that God punishes severely. (2:165)

In the same way that human beings are naturally borne towards sensual desires, *God has endeared faith to you and made it beautiful to your hearts; He has made disbelief, mischief, and disobedience hateful to you. (49:7)*

Humanity thus finds itself split between two incompatible loves: the one that leads to faith and conformity with the divine will, and the other, which brings one to the nether world (2:216). The presence of God, the source and final end of all things, gives direction to the entire discourse of the Quran: love and friendship can only come from God and lead back to him. The Quran also accentuates God’s nearness to us, stating that He is closer to us than ourselves and that He is present everywhere, as when it states: “He is with you wherever you are.” (57:4)

Believers attract God's love to themselves by their works and especially by imitation of the Prophet, but there can be no pretension of loving God on their own initiative. It is said thus to the Prophet: "Say: if you truly love God, follow me, God will love you." (3:31)

To respond to this call, Muslims obliged themselves to follow the true path of the Prophet Muhammad who has been described in the Quran as "And you [Muhammad] stands on an exalted standard of character." (68:4)

Now, we have a fascinating verse in the Quran, in which the measure of the Prophet's eagerness to guide people and make them closer to God has been described by the word of "*hirs*," greedy. "A Messenger has come to you from among yourselves. Your suffering distresses him: he is greedy for you and full of kindness and mercy towards the believers." (9:128)

The word "greedy" in Arabic and also in Farsi, as a matter of behavior and manner, is a negative adjective. We usually use it for showing an excess desire and a tendency for material things and for more of something than is necessary or justified. That's why no translator of the Quran used 'greedy' to describe this relationship and eagerness. These are some instances of translations:

"deeply concerned for you" (Abdel Haleem)

"full of concern for you" (Pickthal)

"excessively solicitous respecting you" (Shaker)

"anxious over you" (Hilali)

"ardently anxious is he over you" (Yusuf Ali)

Yet, it seems no other word could show this high and deep measure of the Prophet's love and affection to people. Moreover, in some other verses the Quran states that the aforementioned "greedy" causes an extreme anxiety, sorrow, and pain for the Prophet: "However greedily you may want them to, most men will not believe." (12:103) Again, translators proposed these phrases:

"eagerly you may want" (Abdel Haleem)

"desire it eagerly" (Hilali)

"try much" (Pickthal)

"desire it eagerly" (Shaker)

“ardently thou dost desire it” (Yusuf Ali)

Also,

It was not to distress you [Prophet] that We sent down the Quran to you, but as a reminder for those who hold God in awe. (20:2-3)

The Quran thus designates itself and the Prophet Muhammad the carrier of God’s message of love and beneficence, which is manifested in the very beginning in His command to the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam (15:29). Prostration is a supreme act of humanity and devotion, something that God would normally reserve for Himself. God’s direct involvement also signifies the intimacy and closeness of the God-man relationship, which did not cease with the first act of creation but continues to be expressed and unfolded as a reality through the religious experiences of the believers.

The passages in the Quran dealing with love have encouraged authors to extract from the Quran the fundamentals of divine and human love. Traces of the affective side of love are found consequently in the *ahadith* (traditions), when quoting verses such as, “We offered the Trust [of moral responsibility] to the heavens, the earth, and the mountains, yet they refused to undertake it and were afraid of it; mankind undertook it – they have always been inept and foolish.” (33:72)

A commentator such as Mulla Sadra Shirazi⁵¹ gives an outline of a theory of love based on the above verse of the Quran. According to him, God is the first lover and beloved, and mankind undertook His love and became responsible to give it to other creatures.⁵²

Ibn Arabi quotes a brilliant hadith of the Prophet which clearly shows God’s eagerness for human’s giving of love to the others:

The Messenger of God, may God give him blessings and peace, said: God, ever blessed and exalted is He, says: “My love is by necessity for those who love one another in Me,

⁵¹ Mulla Sadra (1572-1640) who was an Iranian Shia Islamic philosopher and theologian who introduced a new version of the Islamic philosophy called as *Hikmat al-Motaaliah*, the Transcendental Philosophy, a combination of peripatetic and Illuminative philosophy. He is arguably the single most important and influential philosopher in the Muslim world in the last four hundred years. *Al-Asfar al-Arbaa*, The Four Journeys [of the intellect], among his numerous works, is his masterpiece.

⁵² Mulla Sadra, *Al- Asfar al-Arbaa*, Sadra Islamic Philosophy Research Institute, Tehran, 2001, vol.7, p. 239.

for those who sit with one another in Me, for those who give generously to one another in Me, and for those who visit one another in Me.”⁵³

Finally, Imam Sadiq, the sixth Imam of Shias, answering the question about who is God’s most beloved, says: “God Almighty said: ‘People are My Family, then, the most beloved one among you to me is the one who is more compassionate and merciful to them.’”⁵⁴

Religion of Love

Since religion is the matrix of the God-man relationship, it is founded on divine love, mercy and grace. The rituals of the faith, the prayer and supplication, when engaged in with sincerity, are expressive of man’s devotion to and love for God, which is, as God taught His beloved servants to feel, without intermediaries. God made His unceasing interest in and involvement with man’s affairs known when He declared in the Quran: “Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God.” (2:115) Also,

When My servants ask you [Muhammad] concerning Me, I am indeed close to them. I listen to the prayer of every supplicant when he calls on Me. (2:186)

God’s love is undoubtedly earned through virtuous conduct. But sincerity and devotion enhance the value of that conduct. Love and devotion are the building blocks of the God-man relationship. Faith is not a formality, nor conformity to rituals by any means, notwithstanding the persuasive language of the jurists which has almost managed to constrict the emotional appeal of the Quran by means of a plethora of legal rules. To argue that love and devotion are not a matter of conformity to rules is evident in the emotionally-anchored language of the Quranic address. A perusal of the Quran thus leaves little doubt that Islam is faith and devotion in the first place, and legal rules and rituals second. Also, God’s love is tied up with the love of His beloved servants. Note for example:

God is truly compassionate and merciful to mankind. (22:65)

⁵³ *Divine sayings; 101 Hadith Qudsi (The Mishkat al-Anwar)*, translated by Stephen Hirtenstein and Martin Notcutt, Anqa Publishing, Oxford, 2008, hadith no. 88.

⁵⁴ Shaikh Koleini Razi, *Osul-e Kafi*, vol. 2, p. 164.

Saadi Shirazi,⁵⁵ one of the greatest Iranian poets says,
*Religion consists alone in the service of the people; it finds no place in the prayer-
beads, or prayer-rug, or tattered garment.*⁵⁶

So, in proportion as humans love God, they see God in all His creatures, and go forth to them in acts of charity. Pious works are naught without love.

*Cheer one sad heart: thy loving deed will be
More than a thousand temples raised by thee.
One freeman whom thy kindness hath enslaved
Outweighs by far a thousand slaves set free.*⁵⁷

That is why Rumi invites us to go beyond the limits of this or that religion, and devote ourselves to what he calls “the religion of love.” The religion of love for Rumi is not the negation of this or that religion, but it is the higher level of spirituality. This idea is deeply rooted in Rumi’s personal experience of love. Rumi himself, in the beginning, was to a large extent, a man of traditional religion. For a man of religion, religion is the center of the world of spirituality. Salvation cannot be attained but through a particular religion. But later Rumi became a man of God. For a man of God there is no fundamental difference between this or that particular religion, as long as they lead you to God. Rumi’s personal experience of love was a turning point in his theology, a kind of “Copernican Revolution.” For a man of God, it is God and not any particular religion that is the center of the spiritual world. The goal is to encounter God beyond any veil, including the veil of religion. That is why Rumi considered himself as a follower of the “religion of love,” and he claims that the religion of love is different and beyond all other religions, it is all about God and nothing else:

*My religion is to live through love-
life through this spirit and body is my shame.*⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Abu-Muhammad Muslih al-Din bin Abdallah Shirazi (1210-1291/92), better known as Saadi Shirazi, was one of the major Persian poets of the medieval period. He is recognized for the quality of his writings and for the depth of his social and moral thoughts. His masterpieces are *Gulistan* and *Bustan*.

⁵⁶ Saadi, *Bustan*, chapter 1, story 8th.

⁵⁷ Nicholson, p. 108.

*Love's creed is separate from all religions:
The creed and denomination of lovers is God.⁵⁹*

Hafiz⁶⁰ also says,

*In love no difference there is between monastery and Sufi tavern of ruins,
Wheresoever it be, there is the glow of the light of the Beloved's Face.⁶¹*

The Other Types of Religiosity

Abdulkarim Soroush elaborating the types of religiosity; has coined three terms: “Pragmatic” (or utilitarian) religiosity; “Theoretical” religiosity; and “Experiential” religiosity.⁶² This kind of distinction is widespread in religious language. For example, these three ways of approaching God could correspond with the three basic Hindu paths – *karma yoga*, *bhakti yoga*, and *jnana yoga*.⁶³ Whatever the heuristic value of such schemes, there can be no doubt that from earliest times Muslims who strove to gain nearness to God did so through activity, knowledge and love.

The first type of religiosity,⁶⁴ as Soroush describes it, is mundane, hereditary, deterministic, emotional, dogmatic, ritualistic, identity-bound, external, and collective. Its language is legalistic-juristic, mythic, imitative, obedient, traditional and habitual. Here, the volume of activities and deeds are the measure of the intensity or otherwise of conviction: performing pilgrimage numerous times, visiting shrines, praying frequently and so on. Through these actions, the religious person feels more successful and closer to God. Mass rituals and rites nourish this religiosity more than anything else. Soroush explains how this type of religiosity both stirs up emotions and draws strength from them, and gradually becomes tainted by dogmatism and prejudice and loses the capacity to tolerate dissent. Mocking this version, he says that it defends set habits and traditions dogmatically and sees

⁵⁸ *Mathnavi*, book VI, section 116.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, book II, section 36.

⁶⁰ Khwaja Shams al-Din Muhammad Hafiz-e Shirazi (1325/26–1389/1390) was an Iranian poet. His collected works composed of series of Persian literature are to be found in the homes of most people in Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Themes of his *ghazals* are the beloved, faith, and exposing hypocrisy.

⁶¹ *Divan*, ghazal 63.

⁶² *Akhlaq-e Khodayan*, The Morals of Gods, eBook (in Farsi), Rah-e Now Publisher, 2005, pp. 81-88.

⁶³ Chittick, *Sufism*, p. 74.

⁶⁴ I prefer to call this type as the “jurisprudential” religiosity or “religion of fear.”

people who tend to raise questions and reflect upon things as crooks and heretics.⁶⁵ Hence, slowly but surely it goes down the path of casting out and excommunicating people. This appears to be an accurate description of some elements of political Islam, especially what I have observed in Iran.

Consequently, in this type of religiosity, dogmatic distinction will be drawn between “us” and “them”, “insiders” and “outsiders,” “believers” and “infidels,” the firm and unyielding categorization of people. This religion simplifies the world and refuses to see the complexities, subtleties and variations of human existence, and, subsequently, engages in unsubtle behavior inappropriate to the elaborate and mysterious nature of life. By creating strict ideological divisions, such religiosity sees people as either heavenly or hellish, views God as an impatient avenger.⁶⁶ This religion imagines God as one’s own God and the Protector of one’s own sect who is uncaring about everyone else. It narrows the definition of truth and broadens the definition of falsehood, highlighting the differences between sects and seeing one’s own sect as the axis and measure of truth and falsehood and the creator of true human identity. It ignores the common attributes of human beings, emphasizes every small difference in belief, and compartmentalizes humanity into so many different sects.

Believers, in this type of religiosity, according to Soroush, are the slaves and God is the master and king;⁶⁷ sin amounts to disobeying his orders rather than being something that causes a contraction of the heart. So, obedience, in this version of religion, is part of a deal aimed at accruing some gain or benefit, not something that causes an expansion of the heart, nor yet a participation in a spiritual experience. There is no element of wonder or secrets or the inner world in this type of religiosity, and morality is always relegated to second place in it and is considered to be decorative at best, entailing no religious burdens or duties in itself. Hafiz has criticized this type of religiosity, when he says:

*Like beggars serve not for the alms
Master keeps his servants in good form.*⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Soroush, p. 82.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 83.

⁶⁷ Ian G. Barbour in his *Religion and Science: historical and contemporary issues*, HarperSanFrancisco 1997, chapter 12 (p.305), elaborates all versions of relationship between God and Humans.

⁶⁸ *Divan*, ghazal 177.

Then, Soroush elaborates another type of religiosity, “theoretical religiosity,” which is the business of theologians and philosophers. In this approach to religion, the final concern is question of God’s secrets – not secrets in the sense of myths, but secrets as rational problems and puzzles that one must grapple with like a mental wrestler. Here one finds a theoretical rationality which is sensitive to the appropriateness of a reason to a claim. Soroush says that if we identify pragmatic religiosity by its dogmatism, theoretical religiosity can be identified by a sense of rational wonder or doubt and, by the same token, in experiential religiosity by a sense of spiritual wonder the road is paved for entering the realm of certainty.⁶⁹ Every rational thinker, according to Soroush, has their own conception of religion, that is, their own understanding of God, the Prophet, revelation, joy, wretchedness, sin and obedience. It is an understanding that belongs to that believer alone, results from their own reflections and is subjected to constant questioning and revision.⁷⁰ All this examining, reexamining, rediscovering, doubting and pondering is the essence of worship to the theologian, while sin would amount to submitting uncritically to beliefs, succumbing to popular vulgarities, following superstitions and famous personalities, and refusing to engage in doubt and reflection. And the believer’s joy lies in the excellence of his theoretical skills. Here, reason assists the leader rather than the leader’s assisting reason. So, in this type of religiosity, the particular form of worship is thought, and one can enter into dialogue with its religious personalities without having to praise and revere them unquestioningly. It conceives of moral virtues as things that help the individual arrive at a better and more advanced understanding of error. It considers the worst forms of villainy to be dishonesty, duplicity, deception, pride, arrogance, mischievous cunning, pretentiousness, and irrationality. Rumi criticizes this type of religiosity when he says:

*Strip yourself bare of overweening intellect,
That grace may ever be shed upon you from above.
Cleverness is the opposite of humility and submission,
Quit cleverness, and consort with simple-mindedness!*⁷¹

⁶⁹ Soroush, p. 84.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 85.

⁷¹ *Mathnavi*, book VI, section 79.

Also, Rumi likens the cunning displayed by theologians and philosopher to a diver's derring-do under the sea that proves more dangerous than beneficial:

*A cunning diver swims under the sea
He'll not last long and will drown eventually
Love is like a ship for the fortunate few
Salvation is likely and the dangers are few.*⁷²

However, Saadi Shirazi in comparing these two types of religiosity to each other, prefers the second one, when he says,

*A certain holy man having quitted the monastery,
And the society of religious men, became a member of a college.
I asked 'what the difference between being a learned was,
Or a religious man that could induce him to change his society?'
He replied, 'The devotee saves his own blanket out of the waves,
And the learned man endeavours to rescue others from drowning.'*⁷³

Comparing these types of religiosity to an experiential one, Soroush holds that in experiential religiosity, we step from the domain of separation into the domain of nearness.⁷⁴ The previous types of religiosity can be, according to him, described as religiosities of distance, for the first was physical and practical and the second mental and reflective. So the first version of religion was based on instrumental rationality and the second is on the theoretical one. One was after utility and the other after rational knowledge. But, Soroush states that the experiential religiosity is neither physical nor mental, neither instrumental nor theoretical; it seeks the evident and the manifest, and if gnostic religiosity is concerned with hearing, the experiential believer is concerned with seeing.⁷⁵ This, as Soroush says, reminds us of Rumi's poem,

I've heard the inebriating melody of faith

⁷² Ibid., IV, 52.

⁷³ *Golestan*, p. 104. Gladwin, chap. 4: 'On the Advantages of Taciturnity,' Tale xxii, p. 197. [Trans.]

⁷⁴ Soroush, p. 87.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 88.

*What I long for now is to see its face.*⁷⁶

Accordingly, God in this type of religiosity is a graceful and alluring beloved. The certainty that is unattainable in theoretical religiosity is picked like a fruit from the tree of experience here and the freewill that was seen as a virtue there now gives way to the passionate compulsion of love. Here, instead of being the cause of the believer's religious experience and excellence, rites and rituals are the effect of that excellence, that is, they follow and flow from the believer's passionate devotion to God, instead of being an instrument for achieving it. Hence, ritualism and dedication to religious practices are not the central axis of this religiosity. Eventually, Rumi draws up comprehensive approach to all three types of religiosity in these words:

So many nights spent standing at the feet of the Prophet

Cloak shredded, hair disheveled, feet distended

A quest for the absolution of sins past and present?

*This is the passion of love, not hope or fear, he retorted.*⁷⁷

Conclusion

In this part of the project we explored the true meaning of love and where it comes from. Though it is not easy to define love, and when the pen comes to the question, it breaks in half, it can be pictured as the motive force for God's creative activity. Love is not to be learned from men: it is one of God's gifts and comes of His grace. The first lover and beloved is God; and His love to himself emanates to all creatures; especially to humans for undertaking God's soul and trust. So, love flows in whole being. Also, we examined how love works and how it can remove the barriers that prevent us from rejoining the heaven and sacrificing our life for our brethren's sake. Love is self-renunciation and self-sacrifice, the giving up of all possessions for the Beloved's sake without any thought of reward. Also, we searched love in the Quran to know the importance of it in this holy book and to learn the measure of eagerness of God and His Prophet's to humans.

⁷⁶ *Divan-e-Shams*, ghazal 441.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, *tarjiaat*, 4.

Finally, we introduced the “religion of love” and compared it to the other types of religiosity. We realized that since God’s love is tied up with the love of His beloved servants, and religion is the matrix of the God-man relationship founded on divine love, mercy and grace, the substantial language of religion cannot be but the language of love; not jurisprudential, not theological and not philosophical. This is the religion that heals. Jurisprudence cannot heal, and neither can knowledge. Only love can bind together the creature with the creator and the creatures with each other. It is that kind of religion that we need to remove the alienation, division, and hatred in our society.

In Part III, to extend our findings so far about equality and love, we will introduce, the late Ismael Dulabi and the contemporary religious healers in Iran as the exemplars of the religion of love and their impact on the people of Iran, especially the youth.

PART III Healing

He is who heals me when I am ill.

(The Quran, 26:80)

The word used for religion in Arabic is *din*, obviously related to the Hebrew and Aramaic word meaning law (*din*=law). According to this meaning, which is very influenced by Jewish tradition, it seems that the basic function of religion in human society is but worshipping God by a mass of rituals and obligations. This type of religiosity, as we saw in Soroush's description, gradually becomes tainted by dogmatism and prejudice and loses the capacity to tolerate dissent. Religion in this version is less concerned about our worldly life; it rather seeks salvation in the hereafter by practicing God's commands. However, human history attests that one of the main reasons for accepting religious faith has been the feeling of loneliness, meaningless, and suffering in this life. We suffer from violence, catastrophes, disorderliness, death, and spiritual emptiness. People want to have a better life – more peaceful, more joyful, full of satisfaction – and religions claim they can do this. God in the Quran has guaranteed *hayat-e tayyaibah*, “good life” for the believers:

To whoever, male or female, does good deeds and has faith, We shall give a good life and reward them according to the best of their actions. (16:97)

In this part of the project we will focus on healing, the very crucial but neglected function of religion, in general, and in particular on the contemporary religious healer in Iran, the late Haji Ismael Dulabi. We will explore how the people of Iran after 35 years, since the Islamic Revolution, having been governed by an Islamic political system, are enthusiastically participating and holding spiritual sermons and programs in which the vital need of love and forgiveness in action is called and spread. Knowing these spiritual men, you will understand the soul of Iran – not just the role of political religion or dogma, but the spiritual role of faith, love and beauty. The radical schools of Shiite Islam maintain an intractable identification with their interpretation of Islam, and as such, they have played a strong role in shaping the Iranian people's view of both Islam and of religion in

general. Because of these schools' use and perversion of Islam for political purposes, many Iranians have been turned off by religion – especially among the youth who represent the vast majority of the population.

Religious Healing

Throughout history, healing function has been recognized and has played a significant role in every religion.⁷⁸ For many, God comes when we get sick. There have been claims that faith can cure blindness, deafness, cancer, AIDS, developmental disorders, anemia, arthritis, corns, defective speech, multiple sclerosis, skin rashes, total body paralysis, and various injuries. In the hospital we pray that God guides the hand of the surgeon and, whether the medical procedure is successful or not, we recognize that the outcome is in God's hands.

The prophets or key figures of religions were often the principal source of the healings. Similarly, monotheistic religions, from their beginning, have laid great stress on health and on healing.⁷⁹ This can be seen in Exodus 15:26, when God tells Moses, "I am the Lord that healeth thee." Zoroaster was known as a healer and some people referred to him for healing.⁸⁰ The prophets such as Elijah and Elisha were acknowledged as healers. Healing, in fact, was expected of all true prophets and was often the sign, a miracle that their calling was genuinely from God. Jesus Christ inherited this healing background too and commissioned the Apostles to "heal the sick" (Luke 10:9). Thirty-six times in the Quran

⁷⁸ It is not just religions that have expressed this deep connection with personal healing. Tribes and cultures in Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas have realized the relationship of curing the body to the profound powers of the universe. John White in his *Future Science: Life energies and the physics of paranormal phenomena*, Anchor Books, 1977, lists ninety-seven different cultures, each of which has its own name referring to healing energy. For instance, the Chinese call it *chi* or *qi*, while the Hindu uses the term *prana*. The Japanese call it *ki*, the North American Indians refer to it as medicine, the *Melanese* call it *mana*.

⁷⁹ However, in contrast to this understanding of God who is seen primarily as the healer, it has been said that the God of Abrahamic religions not only sympathizes with us, but is also the God who passes judgment on sin. Through the centuries, the main Semitic religions have not let us forget that our sickness – and the death our being sick beacons – may well be a sign of God's judgment. In Shiite tradition God might also send suffering as a test or as a means of deepening us and teaching us wisdom. Also often believers in the Abrahamic religions have turned to God only in times of illness and crisis. Such a god who we invoke only in times of trouble is not worthy of worship. For that god is quite simply the god of the gaps. Such a god was the only way many thought we could make sense of God after Newton's mechanistic physics. This god appears at the hospital beside, that is, the god that takes care of anything that is beyond the power of medicine to cure. This god to whom we too often pray cannot help but be a god at the service of our fear of death. See: Joel J. Shuman and Keith G. Meador, *Heal Thyself*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

⁸⁰ M. Najmabadi, *The History of Iranian Medicine*, Vol. 1, Tehran: Honarbakhsh Pub., 1962, p.152.

and in many of the prophetic hadiths Muslims hear stories about Jesus Christ. Based on these stories, Jesus is very well known as a divine healer among Muslims. He is credited with a number of miracles including creating birds from clay; healing a blind person and a leper; raising the dead; and telling the Children of Israel what they ate and what they stored in their houses. Here is a typical one in the Quran:

Then God will say, 'Jesus, son of Mary! Remember My favor to you and to your mother: how I strengthened you with the holy spirit, so that you spoke to people in your infancy and as a grown man; how I taught you the Scripture and wisdom, the Torah and the Gospel; how, by My leave, you fashioned the shape of a bird out of clay, breathed into it, and it became, by My leave, a bird; how, by My leave, you healed the blind person and the leper; how, by My leave, you brought the dead back to life; how I restrained the Children of Israel from [harming] you when you brought them clear signs, and those of them who disbelieved said, "This is clearly nothing but sorcery. (5:110)

Healing is a key part of the revelation given to the Prophet Muhammad in the Quran. Islamic tradition, in both the Sunni and Shia branches, narrates several dramatic healings by the Prophet. However, his main miracle accepted by all Muslims is the holy book of Quran. The word *shifa*, "healing," is repeated three times in the Quran - along with the words *huda*, "guidance" and *rahmah*, "mercy" - in contexts where it is often understood as meaning the remedy for forgetfulness and ignorance of God.

Say, 'It is guidance and healing for those who have faith, but the ears of the disbelievers are heavy, they are blind to it, it is as if they are being called from a distant place.' (41:44)

People, a teaching from your Lord has come to you, a healing (shifa) for what is in [your] hearts, and guidance (huda) and mercy (rahma) for the believers. (10:57)

We send down the Quran as healing (shifa) and mercy (rahma) to those who believe; as for those who disbelieve, it only increases their loss. (17:82)

Its opposite, the word *marad*, “illness,” is attested thirteen times, and in all these cases it refers to the heart. However, it is believed by all Muslims that the Quran is the perfect cure for all diseases, both those of the body and those of the soul. We have directly just one verse in the Quran that seems to cover all types of physical and spiritual illnesses. Let’s read this amazing verse and some accompanying it:

[The Lord of the Worlds] who created me. It is He who guides me; He who gives me food and drink; He who heals me when I am ill; He who will make me die and then give me life again; and He who will, I hope, forgive my faults on the Day of Judgment. My Lord, grant me wisdom; join me with the righteous; give me a good name among later generations; make me one of those given the Garden of Bliss – forgive my father, for he is one of those who have gone astray – and do not disgrace me on the Day when all people are resurrected: the Day when neither wealth nor children can help, when the only one who will be saved is the one who comes before God with a heart devoted to Him. (26:78-89)

In addition to these direct references, there are in the Quran injunctions that have been given a healing interpretation. Healing is a manifestation of divine mercy and provides a vehicle for repentance and gratitude through interior prayers, invocations of the divine names of God, verbal spells, and recitation of the Quran. Illnesses of the heart, on the other hand, are spiritual, emotional, and mental both in origin and in cure. They are caused by heart sickness, defined as emotional and mental states such as suspicion, doubt and loss of faith, or they can be caused by sins of commission such as desire or allurements. “Spiritual” illness included what modern western medicine would identify as mental or emotional illness, since in Islamic understanding the ultimate causation of mental or emotional unease (anxiety, depression, stress, doubt, uncertainty) are lapses or weakening in faith. Correspondingly, health and well-being rest upon “spiritual” nourishment. Even physical illness was often categorized as having a non-physical causality, such as ascribing

the condition of epilepsy to spirit possession which required an exorcism using Quranic verses to accomplish “the rehabilitation of one’s sanity and the revival of his faith.”⁸¹

Hadith literature collected in a genre of medieval texts entitled *Tibb al-Nabawi*, “prophetic medicine,” prescribed using the Quran for the prevention and healing of disease, especially for “spiritual illness.” Shia medical texts also invoke the power of the Quran in the healing and protection of the faithful. A related hadith of the sixth Imam, Jafar Sadiq says: “Whomsoever the Quran does not heal, God does not heal him. Is there anything more effective in these matters than the Quran? Ask us, we will teach you and acquaint you with the verses of the Quran for every illness.”⁸²

Quranic recitation, or *tahqiq*, in which Muslims adorn the Quran with their voices, has both informal curative as well as more formal ritual performance contexts. The melodic nature of Quranic recitation is amplified in *dhikr* to increase and intensify the emotional impact and transformative nature of its performance and its audition. Listening to recitation is described in the prophetic medical texts as the “calmer of hearts, food of the spirit. It is one of the most important psychological medicines. It is a source of pleasure, even to some animals.”⁸³ Chanting the divine names of God and phrases from the Quran is recommended as a specific remedy against pre-Islamic sorcery by the Prophet as “faith and nearness to his lord is the divine medicine that no disease can resist... invoking the divine attributes will sharpen one’s hearing and sight and sustain his faculties and is the opposite of all ailments and sufferings.”⁸⁴ Due to the healing properties of certain *suras* (chapters) in the Quran, a great many of them are recommended to be recited for bringing blessing and healing. Donning a garment with verses from the Quran, the phrases of refuge-taking in the final two chapters of the Quran, is universally applicable to all purposes of protection whether against accident, illness, acts of nature, demonic powers, the evil eye, spiritual dangers from the lower self (*nafs*), the evil which God has created:

Say [Prophet], I seek refuge with the Lord of daybreak, against the harm in what He has created, the harm in the night when darkness gathers, the harm in witches when they blow on knots, the harm in the envier when he envies. (113:1-5)

⁸¹ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Tibb al-Nabawi*, Cairo, 1978, p. 46-7.

⁸² Ibn Bistam, al-Husayn and Abdallah ibn Bistam, *Tibb al-Aimma*, Beirut, 1994, p. 54.

⁸³ Al-Suyui, *Tibb al-nabawi*, Beirut 1986, p. 127.

⁸⁴ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya pp. 91-2, 165.

Say, I seek refuge with the Lord of people, the Controller of people, the God of people, against the harm of the slinking whisperer—who whispers into the hearts of people—whether they be jinn or people. (114:1-6)

Scientific Research on Religious Healing in Iran⁸⁵

Contemporary religious healers operate as alternatives or complements to the practitioners of western medicine, in both Muslim countries and among the emigrant Muslim communities in the West.⁸⁶ Accordingly, although mainstream allopathic medicine is the dominant model in Iran, many other kinds of healing are currently also being used. My colleague, Fatemeh Javaheri in her paper 'Prayer Healing'⁸⁷ that using participatory observation and interviews with fourteen healers who were active in Iran, explores some aspects of religious healing in Iran. Her findings indicate that, despite the increasing growth in scientific medicine, the effect of religion on health is very welcomed by both the observant and non-observant Shia Muslims in Iran. As she states, prayer is the most common practice in all religious systems. "Generally prayer, understood as a human communication with divine and spiritual entities, has been present in most of the religions in human history."⁸⁸ It has been noted that "Prayer serves many functions including invocation, adoration, thanksgiving, confession of repented sin and petition. Petition may be both for one's own needs and, in prayer of intercession, for the needs of others. It may be a request for material or spiritual benefit."⁸⁹ Sometimes people pray to heal patients in a special manner, and this kind of practice is known as prayer healing. "Prayer healing is classified as a spiritual category of alternative or complementary medicine."⁹⁰

There are different viewpoints, as Javaheri mentions, concerning the impact of prayer healing. Some believe that prayer healing has only a placebo effect, while others see

⁸⁵ Before this summer visit to ND, I shared my thoughts regarding this research project with my colleague Fatemeh Javaheri in Iran. She informed me that she has done scientific research on 'Prayer Healing' and showed her enthusiasm to contribute in my research. I am honored to refer to her esteemed research in this part of my project and I am very grateful for being permitted to use her findings here.

⁸⁶ See: Peter Antes, *Zeitschrift Fur Evangelische Ethik*, 1998, Vol. 42(4), pp.258-265.

⁸⁷ Fatemeh Javaheri (an associate professor in Sociology Department at Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran), 'Prayer Healing: An Experiential Description of Iranian Prayer Healing,' *Journal of Religion and Health*, Vol. 45, No. 2, Summer 2006, pp. 171-182.

⁸⁸ Javaheri, p. 172, (Eliade, 1987, p. 489)

⁸⁹ Ibid., (Grant, 1995, p. 521-522)

⁹⁰ Ibid., (Easthope, 1998, p. 272)

this healing as a form of quackery or charlatanism. The third group considers prayer healing permissible as long as it does not conflict with allopathic cures. People can use prayer healing as a complement to conventional medicine.⁹¹ The patient is a person who suffers from a mental or physical disease and seeks to be healed. "Faith healers are people who use the power of suggestion, prayer, and faith in God to promote healing."⁹² Those able to undertake such activities and to satisfy these particular needs may be seen to be endowed with a special gift, which Max Weber would argue legitimizes their power. This he calls charisma: "a certain quality of an individual by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities."⁹³

According to Javaheri, religious healers perform various roles at the same time. First of all they heal patients through prayer, but their role is not limited to healing. Sometimes, for example, people go to healers who act as problem solvers. Their function is to give advice and act as social workers to people who ask for it. While doctors generally perform the role of treatment, it is possible that the multifunctional role of healers makes them more reliable for their clients.⁹⁴ It is important to recognize an essential distinction between healing and curing. "A cure is an externally applied medical intervention that removes all evidences of the diagnosed disease. Healing is an internal process of recovery that takes place on the physical, emotional, mental or spiritual level and results in the person's having a sense of being complete in balance or harmony with self and surroundings."⁹⁵ Thus, the doctor is focused on curing whereas the healer is focused on healing. Healers' authority comes from their personal characteristics and people's attitude toward their being true believers in God.

Healers' diagnoses are relatively simple, but their treatment repertoires are relatively complex. By contrast, the physicians' diagnoses are complex, but the cure repertoire is limited. The physicians' treatments are chiefly medication or, in extreme cases, surgery. On the other hand, the healers' treatment kit contains a large array of

⁹¹ Ibid., P. 173, (Adib 2003, Polma 1994, McLennon 1997)

⁹² Ibid., (Cockerham, 1989, p. 141)

⁹³ Ibid., p. 174, (Scambler, 1987, p. 204)

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 176.

⁹⁵ Ibid., (Chez & Jonas, 1997, p. 1157)

treatment options, which also involve a patient's participation in various treatment activities. Healers are usually works in a religious place and such a place is considered a sacred environment and that private places have an intimate atmosphere for clients. In contrast to that of a healer, a doctor's office is regarded more as a secular place. During interaction with the healer, patients have some special experiences. Patients' experiences are described in terms of their emotional feelings and their interpretations. When they are asked about the emotional feelings during the visit, they refer to experiences such as hope, happiness, lightness, tranquility, weeping and an unidentifiable feeling. The results indicate that, in comparison with mainstream medicine, prayer healing is associated with desirable spiritual experiences for people.⁹⁶

A common theme of various categories of prayer healing is an appeal to God to change a person's physical or psychological condition for the better. In contrast with mainstream medicine, which is based on secularity, objectivity and rationality, prayer healing is based on spirituality and flexibility toward patients that gives them a feeling of support:

Contrast between Healers and Doctors⁹⁷

	Healers	Doctors
Domain of work	Various problem	Treatment
Base of action	Value oriented	Instrumental oriented
Setting	Sacred	Secular
Base of authority	Healer personality	Medical knowledge
Control agency	Nonprofessional	Professional
Approach to patient	Holism	Particularism
Training process	Traditional medicine	Scientific medicine

As regards religious healing, Foskett and Jacobs have stated that "the philosophy behind religious healing is based on the whole person as an individual, as well as part of a

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 179.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 181, table 2.

family and social unit; and as a whole person, body, mind, and spirit but with particular reference to the person's psychological, ethical, and theological frames of reference."⁹⁸

Finally, Javaheri adds that belief in the efficacy of faith healing is not limited to Muslims. "The majority of Americans also believe in the healing power of prayer. A recent Time/CNN poll found that 82% of Americans believe that prayer can cure serious illness. Seventy-three percent of Americans in that poll also believe that praying for others can cure illness and 64% want their physicians to pray with them."⁹⁹ Although it is not possible to answer the question as to whether or not religion can cure our troubles,¹⁰⁰ people's reference to prayer healing indicates an important reality. Despite the increasing dominance of scientific medicine, traditional healing is still alive. It is a cultural way of coping with health problems. "Religion has exercised more direct control of bodies by itself promulgating moral norms controlling sexuality, reproduction, eating, drinking, entertainments, modesty, cleanliness and purity."¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 181, (Foskett & Jacobs, 1997, p. 319)

⁹⁹ Ibid., (Ameling, 2000, p. 41)

¹⁰⁰ Although scientific investigation in faith-based healing has increased significantly, M.R. Tonelli and T.C. Callahan ask in their article "Why Alternative Medicine Cannot Be Evidence-Based," *Academic Medicine*, 2001, 76(12):1213-1220.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., (McGuire, 1966, p. 105)

Dulabi as Exemplar of a Religious Healer

As we saw earlier, healing function has been recognized a significant part of the revelation in the Quran. And as we saw, in the holy book of Quran, healing comes with guidance and mercy - in contexts where it is often understood as meaning the remedy for forgetfulness and ignorance of God. So the vocation of spiritual men according to the Quran is to heal heart diseases, which was cleared comes from lack of love and feeling to be lonely.

Contemporary religious healers operate as alternatives or complements to the practitioners of western medicine, in both Muslim countries and among the emigrant Muslim communities in the West. Many scientific studies suggest a positive influence of religion on health.¹⁰² As we found in Javaheri's study, religious healers in general and Shiite healers in particular perform various functions at the same time in their societies. Their function is not limited to healing; they also act as problem solvers. They give advice and provide social services to people who ask for such help. Here, I would like to introduce Rev. Haji Ismael Dulabi as one of the brilliant exemplars among the contemporary religious healers in Iran whom God appointed to become functionaries in their communities and whom He has gifted to become healers.

The patient's major concern is that the healer or physician knows his or her pain. I heard from a couple of Dulabi's disciples that when the patients confronted Rev. Haji, they did not need tell him very much because he knew everything. In fact, the religious healer constantly reminds the patient, "I know everything." In this way, Rev. Dulabi reassured the patient and established legitimacy in his healing role.

Rev. Haji, as some of his patients confirmed to me, used to resolve contradictions for them that physicians could not because the biomedical script requires physicians to focus on discrete physical pains. Dulabi's patients have experienced a chronic and overbearing pain that was not necessarily localized in time or confined to a specific part of their bodies. In this regard, I heard from one friend of mine, who had gone to visit Rev. Haji for the pain

¹⁰² Here, I would like to refer to a very remarkable research that has been done by Nada Yousefi. She has shown that in a Muslim country like Saudi Arabia, most patients want their physicians to address the religious aspects of their lives; and based on a cross-sectional survey, she has found that out of 225 physicians, 91% agreed that religion had a positive influence on health. See: Nada A. Al-Yousefi, 'Observations of Muslim Physicians Regarding the Influence of Religion on Health and Their Clinical Approach,' *Journal of Religion and Health* (2012) 51: 269-280.

in his legs, that engaging in conversation with Rev. Dulabi about different issues, he finally - without remembering why he had come to visit the Haji – was healed when left Dulabi's house!

Dulabi, in contrast to doctors who often require patients to alter customary behavior such as diet, work, or drinking habits, used to attempt to transform the circumstances of his patients' life in a way that would make his patients regulars. Ismael Dulabi could gradually transform the patient's existence by incorporating him or her, and sometimes the entire family, into the "religion of love." Over the long term, Dulabi used to provide new interpersonal networks as well as place the patient in a new relationship with God (relationships with other human beings, in this case, become subsumed within the interaction with God). Dulabi was a caller for forgiveness. Just look at this inspiring thought,

Forgive yourself, yourself! If you realized that nothing is from you, and whatever you have comes from God and His Awliya, "Saints", then you should understand that whatever you would like them to do for you, you should do for yourself. Forgive yourself, yourself! When man comprehends that his hand is given by God, and then wishes God to put His hand on his head, he himself will put his hands on his head!¹⁰³

Rev. Haji was, according to his son, regularly hosting high ranking officials from the government who had problem with each other. Rev. Haji's prescription for those cases was to invite them to forgive each other. He was saying: "Forgive each other if you expect to be forgiven by God," continuing with reciting this verse of the Quran: "Take to forgiveness and enjoin good and turn aside from the ignorant." (7:199) Also, he used to read this *Qudsi Haith*: "O Muhammad, God commands you to rejoin with whoever you cut from, to give who forbade you, and to forgive who oppressed you."

As I learned from Dulabi's devotees, religious healers do not produce miraculous cures. All transformations are achieved gradually, and some patients even experience great pain in the process. Also, I learned that religious healers, like physicians, fail to heal their patients when they fail to attend to the patient's world, with its attendant contradictions

¹⁰³ Dulabi, II, 5.

and requisite transformations. So, one of the great emphasis in Dulabi's life has been given to the relationship between him and his patients that was based on the relationship between the Haji and God.

*If you believe that you are only a guest in this world and God is your host, then all your sorrows will be gone! For thousands of sorrows are in the host's heart and that guest is aware of none of them!*¹⁰⁴

As we elaborate later, the existential method of Dulabi's healing was amazing for his patients who were tired from loneliness and felt lost in this world. For many, the scientific worldview gave rise to self-doubt in modern life and to the essential loneliness of modern man, as well as to the conviction that science and technology are destroying the fabric of society. Dulabi's patients, in a romantic search for a 'lost world,' were getting refuge at his blessed house from the stresses and strains of modern life. Against this background, we can identify several factors that are at play in the strong emphasis on 'I-You' engagement and 'Face-to-Face' relation,¹⁰⁵ including the fact that modern society has given primacy to individual concerns and has placed the spotlight on egocentric interactions.

Dulabi was a huge source of compassion for his visitors. As Javaheri's study shows, to welcome an existential relationship between a religious healer and a patient reflects contemporary people's longing for a compassion that they sense is missing in their lives in modern industrialized society. As I observed in the second chapter, the people of the "religion of love" are gifted by certainty and possess the means to resolve the contradictions by which the patient is encompassed, to deal with patients' subjective experiences and the certainties of pain, or to reorder their lives by the medicine of love and compassion.

*Love's function is changing and coloring! Have not you seen that whomever you love changes your behavior and morals, and you become like her? Our saints, similarly, paint us by the color of God.*¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Referring to M. Buber and E. Levinas' existential terms.

¹⁰⁶ Dulabi, II, 1. Referring to the Quranic verse, *[Our life] takes its color from God, and who gives a better color than God?* (2:138)

A story that I heard myself from Rev. Dulabi's son confirms this thought. Mohammad Dulabi said to me, "Once a person came to visit my father. He was with his sick child asking my father to put his blessed hands on the child's head to be healed. Rev. Haji, using a Socratic dialogue, put this question before the father: 'What is the difference between my hand and yours?' The visitor said, "Yours is blessed by God and empowered by Him." Rev. Haji replied: "And yours as well!" Then the late Dulabi invited the visitor to put his hands on his child's head and believe that all we have is gifted by God. Dulabi's son told me that after a while the child's father contacted me and informed me that his child was healed!

One of the advantages of religious healers like Dulabi is their not asking reward from their patients for the healing. The underlying contemporary assumption about "human nature" – that of the self-interested individual – heightens the drama in the medical consultation when the patient with his or her pain meets the self-interested physician. Facing the physician, the patient confronts a contradiction because the physician is presumably interested in the patient's pain and charged to act in the interest of the patient, and yet the patient knows that the physician is also a human being acting in his own self-interest. The patient facing the religious healer such as Rev. Haji confronts no such conflicts or contradictions, because patients know, and healers constantly remind them, that the healers work only in their interest. Healers are concerned only with the patient's welfare because that is their "nature," and they are rewarded except by God. The Quranic verses in this regard are very impressive:

But if you turn away, I have asked no reward from you; my reward is with God alone, and I am commanded to be one of those who devote themselves to Him. (10:72)

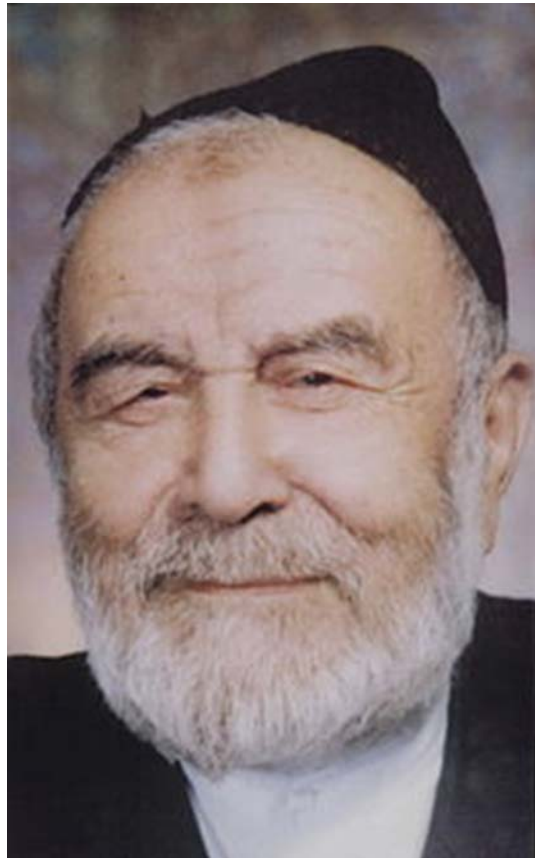
My people, I ask no reward for it from you; my reward comes only from God. I will not drive away the faithful: they are sure to meet their Lord... (11:29)

I ask no reward from you, my people; my reward comes only from Him who created me. (11:51)

In *Sura Shuara*, Poets, describing a number of prophets, the Quran gives us a criterion for holy men, who never ask reward from their people and, following the prophets, are justified by not asking for such reward:

*And I do not ask you any reward for it; my reward is only with the Lord of the worlds.
(26:109,127,145,164,180)*

*Follow him who does not ask you for reward, and they are the followers of the right
course. (36:21)*



Haji Ismael Dulabi
(1903-2002)

*Be a spendthrift in spiritual matters, virtuously and with good temperament. If anyone
is in distress, behave cheerfully with him and help him. If you be spendthrift in such
matters, God will give you more. This also is like knowledge. Knowledge increases with
spending. Wealth decreases with spending but knowledge increases. Good attitude also*

*increases; generosity and kindness also increases. Help in whatever way you can. Some people remove the sorrows of other people like a butterfly.*¹⁰⁷

Who Is Dulabi?

Haji Mohammad Ismael Dulabi was born in 1903 in *Dulab*, one of the southeastern localities of Tehran, Iran in an orthodox, beneficent and enlightened family dedicated to the luminary descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, a family which was highly respected, trusted and visited by the people. His virtuous father was an elderly and trusted person of the locality and so his house was a refuge of the people and constantly visited by scholars and enlightened persons. Right from his childhood Haji Mohammad Ismael was fond of sermons about the Prophet's family's luminary personalities, especially Imam Hussein,¹⁰⁸ and had acquired considerable understanding of their greatness. Therefore, the people considered him a source of blessing, would seek God's help through his benedictions, and would turn to him for spiritual healing in adversities. In his younger days, his occupation was farming, and even in this period the sign of God's grace towards him was quite evident, such that in his endeavor for harnessing his passions and approaching God through constant supplications and deep love, he achieved God's special grace and bounties, and thus he crossed the stages of attaining intimacy with the Supreme Friend, the Almighty God, by a sudden progress by this method. His sermons were attended by notable scholars and mystics, and among his friends were outstanding religious scholars, famous spiritual personalities, and large numbers of youth. The words of this virtuous man, while being simple and free from complex terms and phrases, are deep in meaning and illuminating for the hearts of conscious people.

The Rev. Haji was extremely kind, pleasant-faced, good-tempered, well mannered, and polite. While speaking, he was always cheerful and smiling. He was always saying, "God created us for happiness, not for sorrow!" One of Dulabi's disciples told me that Rev. Haji,

¹⁰⁷ Dulabi, *Tubaye Mohabbat* (Blessings of Love) Vol. I: sermon 2.

¹⁰⁸ The third Imam of Shias who was martyred and beheaded in Karbala, Iraq in 626, for refusing to pledge allegiance to Yazid the Umayyad second caliph. The annual memorial for him, his family, his children and his companions is called *Ashura*, tenth day of Muharram, lunar calendar, and is a day of mourning for Shia Muslims.

when calling his devotees to love and compassion, very often whispered this poetic verse from the famous poet Hafiz: *I do not say to you to drink wine the whole year!*

*For three months drink wine and for nine months be pious!*¹⁰⁹

The beginning and the end of his talk was always concerning God. Looking at him would remind one of God. His conduct toward others was very humble and respectful. One of the most important moral issues that the Haji was very concerned about was to reconcile people with each other. He would invite to his house those who were not on speaking terms with each other, and would reconcile them by means of quoting relevant verses from the Qur'an and Islamic hadiths.

This rich-hearted mystic did not attend any regular or orthodox school, and without any sort of claim and clamor, he endeavored to discover the truth of love and to achieve intimacy with the Supreme God, by trusting His beneficence and treading steadfastly the path of submitting the heart to the superstars of the Holy Prophet's notable family. The eyes of his heart opened upon the light of the Supreme God; he could push aside the curtains of preliminary lights and merge himself in the infinite light of the Almighty Lord, and thus he could get connected with the magnificent Lord of the universe.

Spiritual stations and virtues of the Rev. Haji are quite evident to all those who knew him closely or those who had listened to him in his sessions. The major question regarding the life of this great charismatic figure is how he achieved such high human status. How did a person who lacked formal academic education and had no experience in any university or seminar attain such high spiritual achievements that not only the general public but also educated scholars enjoyed the blessings of his guidance? What was the secret of the Rev. Haji's leap forward in his achievement? And finally: Who has trained him and who was his spiritual instructor?

His Teachers

Although the Rev. Haji Ismael was lacking in formal knowledge commonly acquired at universities and seminaries, he had actually enjoyed the company of some great

¹⁰⁹ *Divan-e Hafiz*, ghazal 274. In this verse Hafiz uses the metaphor of drinking wine for spreading love. He calls his friends to focus their efforts on love at least during the three holy months of Muslims: Rajab, Shaban, and Ramadan, and if they want to meditate and retreat away from the others, they could do it during the rest of year.

dignitaries in scholarship and spirituality. Some great scholars such as the late Ayatollah Muhammad Javad Ansari Hamadani (d. 1918)¹¹⁰, the late Ayatollah Mirza Muhammad Taqi Bafqi (d. 1946), and the Ayatollah Muhammad Ali Shah Abadi (d. 1948, Imam Khomeini's spiritual master) were also his teachers. He also enjoyed the teachings of two other noble scholars: Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Shirazi and Ghulam Ali Qomi.

As a result of the same informal education, he had become quite familiar with the Quran and hadiths, and would translate and interpret the Quran, the hadiths, and supplications, presenting very fine and accurate comments of them that others were less aware of. Thus, the Rev. Haji's familiarity with such Islamic knowledge was due to his benefiting from the presence of such great dignitaries and their like. However, the beginning of his leap forward and spiritual development must be sought somewhere else, which was a turning point in his blessed life.

In my opinion, the secret of the Haji's leap forward, beginning of his spiritual development, and his turning point in life lies in an event that is extremely impressive and instructive. In his early youth, he made a pilgrimage to Najaf and Karbala in Iraq, the most important religious cities for all Shias, where he undergoes a religious experience. He tells us the story of his enlightenment as follows:

When I was a teenager, I accompanied my aged father on a pilgrimage to Imam Ali's shrine in Najaf, Iraq. I was enthusiastically interested in staying in Najaf to visit Imam Ali's shrine every day and to study the Shiite teachings over there. However, my father who was very aged and needed me to work with him on the farm refused my application. I sorrowfully cried in Imam Ali's shrine and asked his soul to intercede. Later, when we went to Karbala, Iraq to visit Imam Hussein's shrine, everything was solved; I got mysteriously relieved! On the first day of our return to our home in Iran, two seyeds¹¹¹ came to visit us. I received them in our dining room and I went to provide something to serve. When I was back to them, suddenly spiritual intoxication happened to me; my heart eyes were opened and I felt myself to be present in the Imam

¹¹⁰ Rev. Dulabi believed that this teacher was higher than the others, for while he was a monotheist he didn't have any specific religion!

¹¹¹Seyed or sayyid is an honorific title given to the offspring of the Prophet Muhammad through his grandsons, Hassan and Hussein, the sons of the Prophet's daughter the Lady Fatimah and his son-in-law Imam Ali.

Hussein's shrine again. He was saying to me: "We gave to you whatever you applied for." It started from that time and continued; I was embraced and graced by Allah; our house became a sanctuary, a blessed place for everyone.¹¹²

In the first step of divine training, his eyes, ears, and heart opened up so that he could see beyond the world of matter and through the high Heaven the things other people could not see and hear what others could not hear. One may wonder here whether a heart can have eyes and ears. One may ask: Is man capable of seeing and hearing things by means other than the physical eyes and ears?

The answer is "yes," it is true. The Islamic hadiths - narrated by both Shias and Sunnis - have given positive answers to this question. Here are some examples on the subject. The Prophet Muhammad said:

There is no servant (human being) except that they have two eyes on their faces to see the worldly things with, and two eyes in their hearts to see the affairs of the Hereafter. Whenever God wants the good of a servant, He opens two eyes in their hearts by which they can see His promised bounties and believe in the Unseen through their unseen eyes.¹¹³

In another hadith, the Holy Prophet said:

If your hearts were not dispersed and you were not so loquacious, you would undoubtedly hear what I hear.¹¹⁴

And similarly, Imam Sadiq said:

Verily the heart has two ears: the Spirit of Faith whispers good in one and the Satan whispers evil in the other one. Thus, anyone of those that wins over the other will dominate him.¹¹⁵

Dulabi attained this blessed position only for seeking the love and enlightenment from God with sagacity, and when he achieved this love and enlightenment, the grace of

¹¹² Dulabi, IV, 9.

¹¹³ *Mizan al-Hikmah*, A Collection of Traditions by Mohammad Reyshahri, X, 4988: 16942.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, X, 4990: 16956.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, X, 4988: 16950.

God became active in him and hence, the words that flow out from his mouth were all words of wisdom that could heal the inner obstacles and sickness of his visitors.

Public Sermons

The Haji's public sessions were usually held in his house once a week. Similarly, in most occasions such as Islamic festive days, birth and martyrdom anniversaries of the Shias' Imams, he would hold sessions in his own house. In the months of *Muharram* and *Safar* and the holy month of *Ramadan*, he would also hold preaching sessions. Weekly sessions were usually held after performing evening and night prayers on Thursday nights with the Haji as prayer leader. After prayers and supplication, tea would be served, and then the Rev. Haji would begin to talk and preach. He was very eloquent; in his lectures, he would try to impart to others what he had found through the Quran and the Islamic traditions as well as the facts about which he had himself had attained certitude.

The main topics of his lectures included monotheism, sincerity, love of God, consistent presence of heart, proximity to God, rendering service to people, pleading with the Ahl al-Bayt, awaiting the Savior, and warning against love of worldly-mindedness, egotism, and whims of carnal soul (*nafs*). The sessions were so spiritual (and otherworldly) that nobody tended to bring up the material and worldly issues, and if by any chance someone would talk of the material things, the people around would ignore them with contempt or even disgust. Dulabi used to conduct sermons about his mystic perceptions and experiences in a very special atmosphere and in a two-way dialogue style resembling somewhat the enlightening speeches of Socrates.

The collection of all his teachings and sessions is quite vast, especially when taking into consideration the load contained in a 'session' related to love and forgiveness. Hence, just a portion of it has been compiled and published by some of his enthusiastic students in the last couple of years. Now, at least, by reading these portions preached by this mystic, we can acquire an understanding of the thoughts and concepts of this contemporary religious healer. The reading of these books needs a method of mutual understanding, sympathy and, of course, humility. I presume that for whoever reads the Haji's inspiring words, they will confirm that he had perceived the truth of the blessings of love from God;

that through loving his Creator he had attained such perfection and high stations that are so baffling - if not impossible - for us even to imagine.

Many times it happens that some ignorant individuals will deny the high stations of those possessed of divine knowledge, merely out of their own disability and failure in comprehending them. In any case, one cannot find a way toward divine knowledge with a negating attitude. As being selfish and egotistic, those who negate the stations of the mystics and the positions of spiritual seekers would not attribute to their own ignorance whatever they do not comprehend, and negate it lest their selfishness and egotism would not be marred.

Accordingly, introducing the spiritual virtues and perfection of the Rev. Dulabi in itself is a task that cannot be carried out by such projects as the present work. The deepest impact that writing his radiant biography can leave would be by illuminating the general features of the Rev. Haji's life, the secret of his attaining the high spiritual stations of those endowed with divine Knowledge, and his way in education and self-building. This, in itself, is a great and valuable task that has, by the Grace of Bounteous Allah, been undertaken. We are grateful to Him for such great achievement. Perhaps this writing is going to be a beginning step toward the actualization of the Haji's prophecy of his being briefly known after his death.

Passing Away

The blessed life of the preacher of the "Blessings of Love" sermons in the last few decades benefited very many enthusiasts from the common as well as the outstanding class of people with his influential words in Iran. Finally, came to an end and the bird of his soul departed this world after a long spiritual life and enriching others on February 19, 2002, and was buried in the shrine of Lady Masuma¹¹⁶ in the city of Qom, Iran.

His son, Mohammad, with the assistance of some devotees, has established a non-profit institute called *Tubaye Mohabbat*, "Blessings of Love," to collect and publish Dulabi's sermons and words. Iranian National TV has produced a couple of special programs on the late Dulabi's life and sermons by the support of this institute. Also, a spiritual movie titled

¹¹⁶ Lady Fatimah Masumeh, daughter of Musa Kazim, the seventh Imam of Shia Twelvers and the beloved sister of Imam Reza, the eighth Imam, who died around 790 AD and buried in Qom, Iran.

“A Piece of Bread” directed by Kamal Tabrizi was produced in 2004, recalling Rev. Dulabi’s healing words and interaction. In this film, in a mysterious incident, a blinded teenager gets healed by the hands of a pure and humble soldier who already visited a wise man on the road to a holy shrine. This wise man of the film recalls Dulabi’s spiritual words in his sermons. It is interesting that in this movie, the soldier heals the blinded teenager by reciting the whole chapter of Mary in the Quran.

The institute has already published six volumes of Dulabi’s spiritual sermons in Farsi. The first volume of this collection including fifteen sermons was published in 2002, when Dulabi still was alive, and now it is in its fifteenth edition. The other volumes which have been published during 2003 through 2011 convey Dulabi’s sermons in this order: second vol., 14 sermons; third vol., 10 sermons; fourth vol., 9 sermons; fifth vol., 8 sermons; sixth vol., 6 sermons. We will now investigate parts of this mystic's world by having glimpses into his thoughts.

An Agent of God’s Mercy

The believers in God might be divided into two groups: those who appoint themselves as agents of divine anger, and those who understand themselves as called to be agents of divine mercy. Dulabi was a good exemplar for God’s Mercy.

God is attributed in the Quran with different names, *asma al-husna*: “Say: ‘Call upon Allah, or call upon Rahman [Merciful]: by whatever name ye call upon Him, (it is well): for to Him belong the Most Beautiful Names.’” (17:110) As this quranic verse shows, the name of Allah and Merciful have been the most popular ones in the Muslim community. Nevertheless, God also has attributed to *ghadab*, “wrath,” “anger”:

Low indeed is the price for which they have sold their souls by denying the God-sent truth, out of envy that God should send His bounty to any of His servants He pleases. The disbelievers have ended up with wrath upon wrath, and a humiliating torment awaits them. (2:90)

It’s evidently possible to indulge one’s own anger, justifying it as God’s, and relying on God’s mercy hereafter - but that seems to bet against great odds, and with hell to pay

here and now for a lot of people. For those who appoint themselves agents of God's anger, there can be only division and strife until the end of time.

By contrast, Ismael Dulabi as an agent of God's mercy was involved in a labor of self-knowledge and then knowledge of others that is endlessly humbling. Dulabi was submerged in mercy towards other people just as a fish is submerged in water. He was giving mercy and taking mercy. A fish wants nothing nor knows anything above water and likewise, an agent of God's Mercy neither wants nor understands anything above mercy.

This is a comedy: we ourselves are in need for of those things we are called upon to give to others: compassion, forgiveness, mercy. Dulabi believed unless we give them, we cannot receive them. God's mercy is of interest to us only in the light of our recognition of our need for it. Those who accept the agency of God's mercy understand their own need for it as the index of the need of others. So, we all are in need of love and mercy of God, "People, it is you who stand in need of God; God needs nothing and is worthy of all praise;" (35:15) but we will not receive it unless we give it to 'the others.' God's mercy is encompassing and infinite, which never is to be excluded or perished: "My Mercy encompasses all things." (7:156)

Thus we are told not only that "My Mercy encompasses all things" but also that "My Mercy takes precedence over My Anger."¹¹⁷ This mercy is experienced by humans in the function of the Prophet Muhammad. The same ought to be said of every Muslim who seeks to be true followers of their Prophet: "We sent you not except as a mercy for all the worlds." (2:107). The structure of Haji Ismael's sermons was profoundly based on 'mercy' and 'love':

When a person nurtures love and dedication towards those who are beloved of God, he achieves something worthwhile. In fact, love and dedication to the virtuous conquers a man, it even kills him and makes a martyr out of him. One who dies for the sake of such a love is not noisy; sees no sword; hears no word. Love kills a person very covertly; it kills him in such a way that no sound is heard, no blood is shed. My dear friends! Enter the sphere of love. Make yourself worthy of this transaction, fasten your belt tightly and be virtuously brave! Be jubilant on the Day of Judgment.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Sahih Bukhari, 13/522, 7554.

¹¹⁸ Dulabi, V, 3.

For Dulabi, “Becoming the beloved of God is higher than becoming the lover of God.”¹¹⁹ One who becomes the beloved of God cannot do anything for God. He becomes overwhelmed and desperate and finds himself helpless in reciprocating the services of God and becomes inactive and God then serves him continuously and he becomes drenched with shame and humility to receive all those kindness from God. “When our Prophet became the beloved of God and perceived that he cannot compensate for the services of God unto him, he poured his love upon His creatures and took all of them in his embrace to deliver them from the plight of ignorance.”¹²⁰ And God said to him:

Say [Muhammad], ‘If you love God, follow me, and God will love you and forgive you your sins; God is most forgiving, most merciful.’ (3:31)

Returning to the theme of mercy, the following passage from Imam Ali is remarkable in placing the necessity of compassion in a universal context, and is one of the most important expressions by the Imam on the unity of the human race and the equality of all human beings. It stands forth as a corrective to all forms of prejudice, particularism and sectarianism that would apply justice or compassion only to members of one’s own ‘group’ however defined:

Infuse your heart with mercy for the subjects, love for them and kindness towards them. Be not like a ravenous beast of prey above them, seeking to devour them. And be aware that people fall under one of two categories: they are either your brother and sister in faith, or your equal in creation. Mistakes slip from them, defects emerge from them, deliberately or accidentally. So bestow upon them your forgiveness and your pardon, just as you would have God bestow upon you His forgiveness and pardon; for you are above them, and the one who has authority over you is above you, and God is above him who appointed you ... and through them He tests you.¹²¹

The universal applicability of compassion is here allied to a reminder of the absolute sovereignty of God. No man—whether a governor or the ruler appointing the governor—is

¹¹⁹ Dulabi, II, 10.

¹²⁰ Dulabi, III, 1.

¹²¹ *Nahjul Balaqah*, letter 53.

anything but a servant of God, utterly dependent upon His mercy. Thus, each person who finds himself in a position of relative superiority over others must constantly remember his own inferiority vis-a-vis the Absolute, and this awareness both leads to compassion on his part towards those beneath him, and attracts to himself the compassion of God above him.

One might cite here also an incident which demonstrates well the Imam's compassionate implementation of justice, and which also serves as an expression of the principle referred to earlier: all people are 'your equal in creation.' The Imam came across an old, blind beggar and inquired about him. He was told that the beggar was a Christian. He told those around him, "You have employed him to the point where he is old and infirm, and now you refuse to help him. Give him maintenance from the public funds."¹²² Following his master, Imam Ali, Dulabi was always encouraging people for charity:

*God rewards you, when you give a generous loan to somebody and do not ask for its return until he gives it back to you. And when he gives it back to you, tell him that I do not need it, if you are still needful. When you give somebody a loan, his respect has to be protected.*¹²³

His son told me that once he had invested a lot of money somewhere with some of his relatives. On the time of giving its interest, the relatives said to him that his portion is less than others, for he invested later. "It was a huge amount" Dulabi's son continued "and I was very sad." My father realized my sadness and told me, "If I would ask you to give me the same amount as a loan and I could not pay it back to you, what would be your reaction?" I said, no problem at all; I was ready to give my soul also for you. Then, my father said, "Suppose you have given the money to me and I am not able to give it back to you, forgive me!"

A Mystic Not a Sufi

The Haji's spiritual seeking and devotion was principally different from that of adherents of Sufi paths. He did not approve of any of the Sufi orders. His spiritual

¹²² Cited by Shayikh Hussein Nuri Hamadani in 'Uşul wa Mabani-e Hukumat-e Islami az Manzar-e Imam Ali,' Principles and foundations of Islamic government from the viewpoint of Imam Ali, in *Proceedings of the International Congress on Imam Ali*, Tehran 2001, p.8.

¹²³ Dulabi, V, 7.

procedure was that of pure devotion to the guidelines by *Ahl al-Bayt* (the Prophet's Household), hence he would not only take heed of the obligations, but he also follow recommended practices.

Ismael Dulabi is a representative of Islamic mysticism, not Sufism. We usually think of spiritual men as hermits wearing frayed clothing, always talking in a symbolic way containing metaphors and mysteries, as a person distracted from personal needs, and living a lonely life. Thoughtful Iranian youth may know Bayazid Bastami (d. 874 or 877), Abul Hassan Kharakani (d. 1033), Khaja Abdulla Ansari (d. 1088), Fariduddin Attar (d. 1190), and perhaps Shah Nematollah Vali (d. 1431), as representative of Islamic mysticism. Young people, with their frank nature and incomplete knowledge of mysticism, tend to regard it in line with Sufism and *Khankah* and *sufi* cloak and rosary and rituals and a hermetic life of a *dervish* or at least something related to it, something other-worldly and irrelevant to contemporary life. Now, if they find a house wherein a humble old man is sharing his inclusive love and mercy to the people without asking them for any reward, who heals their emptiness and sense of annihilation, they definitely go and sit to be healed. They will give their hearts, not just their ears, to this mystic, in order to wash their eyes and to cleanse their hearts and minds in their relationship with 'the others.'

The Islamic mysticism takes its root from religion and the religious and transcendental outlook of the world, in which a mystic, following the Prophet Muhammad and his household's greediness in love to the people, is overwhelmingly concerned about humans' pains and afflictions:

A Messenger has come to you from among yourselves. Your suffering distresses him: he is deeply concerned [greedy] for you and full of kindness and mercy towards the believers. (9:128)

... We feed you for the sake of God alone: We seek neither recompense nor thanks from you. (76:9)

A Muslim mystic is not one who is only absorbed and intoxicated in God, but the one who is engaged in the world on the pattern of the Prophet and his righteous household. Here separation is better than union! For, in union, I serve myself but in separation I serve the Lord and His servants.

*Keep yourself light if you want to progress. You can host the whole world with your heart. You can pray for all the people on earth with your heart. Say, O God, the table of feast that you have spread for me spread for these people also. Whenever you get alone with God, and you receive any blessing, be a spend thrift and ask it for others also. Whenever the conditions are bad, whether spiritually or materially, be generous. If you are in mood for praying and supplication or blessed with some other good act, be a spend thrift.*¹²⁴

The way of a Sufi is different from the way of a Muslim mystic: the former seeks to eliminate duality; consequently it is plagued by intoxication: the latter maintains duality and is marked by sobriety. In the former, one tries to eradicate will and other human attributes; in the latter, the aim is only to eliminate their evil objects. One meets theophanies in the former, which are mere shadows of the real; there is no love for the shadows in the latter. In the latter, love is perfect obedience. One opposes the love of the Hereafter to the love of God in the former; in the latter, the love of God is the love of the Hereafter.

For a Sufi, such as Ibn Arabi, *salah* (daily prayer) is lower than fasting, for one participates in the holiness (*samadiyat*) of God in the latter, whereas in the former one comes down to the “other” and otherness and distinguishes between the worshipper and the worshipped.¹²⁵

For a Muslim mystic such as Dulabi, following the Prophet and his Household is the same as obedience to God, but some Sufis distinguish between them.¹²⁶ In Islamic mysticism, prophecy is incomparably superior to *walayyat*, saintship, and the highest position in closeness to God is reserved only for the prophet not for any other Sufi sage or master. The Prophet himself is the servant of God, nevertheless, some Sufi sages proclaim that “I am *Haq* [God],”¹²⁷ which is nothing but a blasphemy according to a Muslim mystic.

¹²⁴ Dulabi, VI, 6.

¹²⁵ *Futuhāt*, Ch. 2, note 10, Dar al-Sadir, Beirut, (no date).

¹²⁶ For differences in detail, see: *Sufism and Sharia*, Muhammad Abdul Haq Ansari, The Islamic Foundation, India 1986.

¹²⁷ As Mansour Hallaj said and someone like Bayazid Bastami says: "Glory be to me! How great is My majesty!" "Thy obedience to me is greater than my obedience to Thee." "By my life, my grasp is firmer than

In the following few paragraphs, we will now have a look into the spiritual journey of such a kind of a Muslim mystic.

The Inner Calls

Haji Ismael started renewing souls by dealing first with his own soul, and this is the most important aspect of his personality. His teachings are in fact the reflections of his own efforts in search for truth. Throughout the contents of his teachings, we find a person who is boldly and determinately seeking something special. The desire and boldness of this seeker constantly reveals itself to the reader, which is a way of creating a rational model in the minds of the readers. The contents of Haji Ismael's teachings are his outlook towards this material world and the human being, reflecting his long journey from the superficial self to the true self. While passing through his teachings we clearly feel our self being cleaned of wrong conceptions and getting polished. Haji Ismael seems to be a pilgrim, having travelled the folds of eternity, coming a long way of thousands of years, passing through the delights and pleasures of a person past ages, passing through the paradise of the forefathers, and having reached the present era in history, having opened his eyes at the prevailing conditions of the present times. According to him, we have trod a very long way to arrive at the present juncture and have our presence here, and it is a time now to refresh ourselves and sit down in the shelter of peacefulness. Existence, in the opinion of this mystic, is having a cool eternal shelter beside a beautiful lake. It is on the basis of this outlook that he shows no haste for going or coming, or say, for living an existence.

His streaming and fluent peace resembles a brook, rising from under the stones and moving slowly and calmly, like the waters of the brook moving towards a predestined purpose in its mind. The journey to truth of a truth-seeker, in his opinion, should be time dependent and peaceful, for hastiness is harmful to it, just as it harms a seed when it is made to germinate before time. This world is a place for practicing the taking of rest in the silence of paradise, with the cleverness and consciousness of a truth-seeker in order to arrive safely at the other world, and it should not be spent away for the achievements of

His." "I saw the Kaba walking round me." "Moses desired to see God; I do not desire to see God; He desires to see me." See Ibid., p. 12.

this temporary material world. All of us are provided by nature with the germs of treading the right path practiced and preached by the prophets. A pilgrim of truth, in the beginning, looks all around the world to find a thing that he is missing, but in the end he finds it in himself and dances joyfully around himself. Such a dance around the true self is untiring and eternal, and it is for this reason that a pilgrim of truth has a very active and exploring mind which does not take rest even for a moment.

God Almighty lifts a righteous person to the heights of understanding and then he brings him to the destination that he is seeking. The path of understanding exists in each and every one of us, and if any one falls into a trap on its way, it is in fact one of the requisites of this path. Movement is of course accompanied by pitfalls, but this does not diminish anything from the honor of a truth seeker.

We are couriers and have a destination. The prophets too are couriers and they came to give us a message and thus put us on the correct path. But where is the destination? The destination is your own nature, that same lamp and that same light. Connect yourself properly to them, in a lonely place. Which lover better than you? Which beloved better than Him? If anyone wants to indulge in love making, let him make love with his own creator. Stand in such a situation and see how you feel.¹²⁸

Destroying Death

The mysticism of Ismael Dulabi is not death inspiring, but the destroyer of death. He does not like anyone to become a death-meditating bird, but wants everyone to be joy inspiring like a sugar-cracking parrot.¹²⁹ Death from his outlook is not destruction but the meeting with God and the beauty of His greatness, and it is never a particular moment in our life but it is always beside us. When we go to sleep, we actually enter death and we actually experience death. When we exhale we actually give out our life and when we inhale we continue life. Looking at death from such an angle is pleasure inspiring and gives us the upper hand over it, and this brings calm and humility and peace.

¹²⁸ Dulabi, V, 8.

¹²⁹ Referring to Rumi's mystical poems, "You are putting me on trial; O love, you know my weakness, yet you go on doing so. ... You give sorrow to the death-meditating bird; the nightingales you make drunk and singing. You make the raven desirous of dung; your parrot you make sugar-cracking.", *Divan-e Shams*, ghazal 2912.

Haji Ismael looks at death from a different angle. According to him the moment of death is a very good moment. It is a moment when God reveals Himself. It is because of this same reason that death is pleasant and delicious for some people, so much that when it approaches they become ecstatic. It is for this reason that the moment of death is called *sakaraat* – a meeting wherein the other side of death is present, makes passing through this experience beautiful, and this is why a mystic stands behind this door for years and waits for the day of demise to arrive.

The psychological motives for remembrance of death, too, have not remained hidden from the keen eyes of the contemporary mystic of the Iranian soil. In this noble enquiry, he explores the psychological function of the remembrance of death, and in a very strange and beautiful simplicity, presents it to us, putting it before our eyes. The remembrance of death takes away sorrows and dissolves enmities. But this is possible only by contacting the self and familiarizing with death before its moment of arrival. However, this does not mean wishing for death. What the mystic wants to say is something else. Remaining prepared for death is good, but not early dying. After having achieved such a preparation, the life of this world becomes very valuable. Imam Ali said:

*I will barter not one hour life of this world with the whole life of the next world.*¹³⁰

When death arrives, then there is no time to think. The person who has prepared himself beforehand for such an interesting and beautiful journey does not waste any time. Such a person never shows any hurry for dying. But now that death has arrived, he faces it without fear: “When death has arrived, don't say let me comb my hair and then we will go. Go! At the time of departure, the wind itself will comb your hair.”¹³¹ In a world mixed with illusions and separated from realities, death is a difficult task. The moment of departure should play its role in all levels of existence of man; otherwise, it is not matured. From the other side, death has a gradation and ranks. Passing one level, does not mean you passed all levels. A person who during the time of death, during the time of disintegration of the body, during the time of the death of twilight or middle world, relieves himself from the illusions of this world and accepts death – that person has really died. Death is a gradual

¹³⁰ *Nahjul Balaqah*, letter 27.

¹³¹ Dulabi, I, 14.

phenomenon and starts from the time of birth, from inside the womb of the mother until it reaches its climax at old age. In such a process, death is just the deliverance from one world to another world.

Haji Ismael Dulabi says that the main topic of his speech is death and he has talked about it for a full 70 years. From his outlook, our duty is to die and His duty is to give life. But when a mystic asks long life from God, it can have another meaning. "We don't have anything ourselves, and the things that God and the prophets have given us, they take it away from us in a game of gambling with us. Perhaps someone may say to them: Since you are final winners, then why don't you play a little slower so that I may enjoy longer the pleasure of playing with you?"¹³²

His Ontology

The viewpoint of Haji Ismael Dulabi regarding this world is based on the foundations of his ontology. Basically he is existence minded, and he does not say or know anything about non-existence. The confrontation of the two concepts of existence and non-existence, separate from the view point of philosophy, is the basic concept of the mystic life of Dulabi. This world is dissolved in the sphere of the next world and if it is looked upon without considering this great and universal existence, it is equal non-existing. This non-existence has no place in the realm of existence and hence anything that is seen it is the symbol of this material world and nothing else. This world is a desert all of the time. Don't think that it is a city and it has population. Only God exists and the saints exist, and there is no one else.

I heard from Dulabi's son that Rev. Haji once said, "There was a servant of God whose child's name was "Blessing of God." In his childhood, the father was used to calling him "Blessing". "Blessing, give this one; Blessing bring that one; Blessing come here!" When the child became mature, the father began to call him "Blessing of God." "Blessing of God, give this one; Blessing of God bring that one; Blessing of God come here!" Later, the father called the son just "God!" "O God bring that one; O God give this one; O God come here!" And then Rev. Haji continued that this happens for everybody. This is the destination of all

¹³² Ibid., III, 1.

human beings. First they are looking for a blessing. Then they realize that the blessing comes from God; ultimately, they just want God Himself (not His blessings!)

This world and the next, the two fundamental elements of any religious outlook, in the cheerful eyes of Haji Ismael are like day and night. In this outlook, this world is only the night and the next world is only the day and the middle period is the twilight zone between end of day and the start of night. That which is in this world is the shadow of the next world, and of course a shadow is not a real thing although it resembles the owner of the shadow. Such a world is a mirage which is considered water by a thirsty person, and it can never quench the thirst of anyone. The illusionary character of this world decreases its value so much that it appears a trifle to the eye; as such, even its condemnation is an absurd act.

This world is so illusionary that if you follow it blindly with your illusions, you will all of a sudden find that you left this world and have crossed the bridge into the world of the dead. A mystic looks at this world just once but to the next world a number of times. But to the owner of the worlds he looks always. However, in spite of all this, the purpose of Haji Ismael is not disregarding this world in a hermetical way. The important point is not paying attention to it, not running away from it or opposing it. This world engages people in pleasures and games. So you also consider it as a game and play wisely and enjoy playing and get refreshed and get elated and well-disposed to deal with your duties of the next world and be able to progress – the observing of the religious ordinances is very important when playing any game in this world, as they provide you with rules for playing safely. When you have played well and happily, then prayers and the worship also becomes a delightful.

Forms and Methods

The mystic attitude of Haji Ismael, in addition to having new concepts and a fresher outlook, has absorbing, beautiful and special forms and methods. In a Shiite and Islamic way of dialogue about mysticism, with all its apparent richness and subtlety of substance, the presentation of a fresh and colorful outlook shows his special talent in this regard. However, in the comparison between the mystic thoughts of Haji Ismael and the history of Islamic mysticism, new and special features are seen which can be regarded as the first

steps and very obvious foundations of a new thought. It is worthwhile to have a brief look at some of these special features:

1- Haji Ismael Dulabi is a man of words, and his mysticism starts from this point. A cheerful mystic's words act as a tool to sow the seeds of understanding in other people's hearts. In his Socratic-type dialogue he works with a listening mind and heart and guides his listeners on the path of truth by helping them from within. The hypothesis of this type of a dialogue is as follows: In the self of every listener there is a tendency for such an approach. This same point, on the basis of special methodology of mysticism, delivers the listener from a confusing idea to a meaningful understanding of the issue. During this process, in our inner dialogue with this mystic of our time, we get answers to our common questions in his words and we find his words to be a familiar voice already existing in our nature. He is a personality who dwells in the eternal land of our self and he is familiar with all the dead-ends present in the roads of our mind and conscience.

This type of intelligent and truth-seeking approach with the listener produces a lively mystic from Haji Ismael, who is not in books, who exists as a living entity and sits right in front of us, guides us to take a journey within ourselves and inspires us to listen. Dulabi's mysticism is not a one sided mysticism, is not relieved from 'the other'; it has a direction, it has a stance, and all puzzles will be solved in favor of God's beauty. This man who traveled from Dulab to Isfahan and then to heaven, and saw angels with their white wings, is here, just now in our time, and feels and tells us about all our sufferings and loneliness.

2- Haji Ismael Dulabi is a simple man; a simple man for the unconcerned primitive world, from the bright days of the unknown past. For this same reason nobody gets disinterested or dull by sitting in his company or feels pressured or disturbed or tired. Simplicity is a vital point in outlooks and knowledge, and this concept according to Haji Ismael is intrinsic in nature. He is a mystic who talks simply, who wants simplicity, who sees simply, and who realizes simply. Walking through a thousand complicated questions disturbs and injures the mind of a student. But reaching the monotheistic thoughts of Haji Ismael takes a person to the height of peacefulness. The speech of Haji Ismael is very simple, simple sentences with very simple meanings. But facing each of these simple truths, in the solitude of one's privacy, enslaves a man permanently – or, in the mystic's words,

enslaves the person to the Real Friend. In the simple company of Haji Ismael, we get delivered from the stage of a mixed condition to the stage of a united condition, and get dissolved in infinite being. Such a feeling links us with a feeling of real being and brings us to a sudden discovery, viz., all of us belong to one single whole.

Our responsibility and the truth-searching lessons of Haji Ismael are also quite simple. He does not prescribe any tough practices for reaching to anything. His method is just to make observations in a peaceful atmosphere.

*Do your daily prayers in peace and with patience; perhaps it may come to your mind that you are conversing with God and that God is conversing with you. During your prayers be in yourself and don't let your mind go anywhere it wants. Just concentrate and see who is that is praying.*¹³³

By his method, the deepest spiritual concepts and the most complicated mystic thoughts become converted to simple truths that can be grasped by the layman. "A sin that helps another, courageously fulfill. The sin of Adam and Eve was to our benefit, and we were created in consequences of it. Otherwise there is no birth and multiplication in heaven. God himself wanted them to commit this sin, hence in whichever direction they went that tree would appear before them until they ate from it and were driven out of heaven."¹³⁴

3- The atmosphere of the pure and original thoughts of Haji Ismael is illuminated from the light of wisdom. Examples and allegories are the elements of all kinds of literary and spiritual works. In the holy literature of the world, allegories are the highest, or in other words, the final word for understanding or agreement. Haji Ismael uses every kind of allegory in his speech, from the simple language of the ordinary people in the streets to the theories of the specialists and scholars. He benefits from everything and does not allow it to remain esoteric and obscure. However, what finally remains is nothing but this unknown!

To close this part, let me review Rev. Dulabi's personality:

1- He was a very pure, simple and humble man.

¹³³ Dulabi, VI, 6.

¹³⁴ Referring to "If you drink wine, let a drop or two spill, A sin that helps another, courageously fulfill. Worry not, drink to the music of the harp, Fate worries not when it is time to kill." (*Divan-e Hafiz*, ghazal 299), *Ibid.*, sermon 2.

- 2- He was an uneducated person all he has in knowledge comes from his beloved, God.
- 3- His house served as sanctuary to solve the conflicts between people, to hear their problems and to heal their pains and sorrows.
- 4- His spiritual medicine by which he healed people was nothing other than love that came from his love for God.

The Heavenly People on the Earth

In 1997, a group of youth, meeting in a few rooms of a residential house in Tehran, made themselves busy with service to those in need and by collecting money for charity. Two years later in 1999, they shifted their work from the house to a warehouse in Bime St., Tehran. They moved again in 2002 and with much help formed an Imam Hussein club (*Husseineyyah*) with the name of The House of Reza (*Bayt al-Reza*), where they continued their charity work. They soon came to realize that sharing material goods with people in need is not enough; one should also share their spiritual beauties and goodness. This thought required some cultural and educational work for those who were spiritually in need of it. In 2003, they introduced the *Shams al-Shomus* (The Sun of the Suns) Cultural Research Center and were able to acquire an official license from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Additionally since then, the center has been active in publication, business operations, consulting, research and cultural services.

The center's goals are to familiarize communities with the beloved Creator and bring them into peace with religion. These goals are approached through the means of primarily preaching God in an innovative modern language; secondly, explaining Islamic life by providing contemporary role models; and thirdly, struggling for a moral society and reducing obscenity and depravity.

The center's goals are realized in number of fields such as in research, culture, publication and strategic cooperation with other organizations.

One of the well-known activities of the Shams al-Shomus Cultural Research Center has been their series of conferences on well-respected spiritual and religious leaders in order to provide spiritual exemplars. These series of conferences that were widely

welcomed by the people of many different backgrounds, especially academic scholars and university students, were named "The Heavenly People on the Earth."

The main goals that this center had in mind in hosting their conferences were:

- 1- To present to the youth the beauty of religious spirituality.
- 2- To introduce contemporary spiritual role-models.
- 3- To state the true spiritual values as opposed to non-original values.
- 4- To offer measures in which one could differentiate the true paths from the false ones.
- 5- To warn about common harms and ways to heal and solve them.¹³⁵

Who Are They?

Without reference to the long history of one thousand four hundred years of Islamic mysticism, we come to the present age of Shiite Islam Mysticism, again with great figures both among clergy and non-clergy, men like Seyyed Ali Ghazi, Ayatullah Shahabadi, Mirza Javadaqa Maleki Tabrizi, Ayatullah Khomeini, Ayatullah Keshmiri, Ayatullah Mujtahedi, Allama Tabatabaie, Seyyed Haasanali Nokhodaki and others amongst the clergy, and men like Rajabali Khayyat, Elahi-e Ghomshei, Haji Ismael Dulabi, Mirza Hassan Maragheie, and others amongst the non-clergy. Before mentioning the seminars and gatherings which have been held on some of these stars of contemporary mysticism, I would like to present a definition of the Heavenly People, or the perfect Men in Islamic mysticism.

Men of God: A Definition

"The Heavenly People on the Earth," *Awlyya Allah* (friends of God, saints, etc) or Perfect Men, are those graced people who, due to their perfect *Iman*" (belief), *Zuhd* (asceticism), *Taqwa* (piety), *Fikr* (meditation), *Zikr* (recollection) and *Khidmat* (service to others), accompanied by the will of God, have eliminated all the veils of delusions and superficial appearances from their hearts and eyes, and so their (inner) eye is illuminated with the light of God, thus being able to see what the others do not see and hear what the others do not hear. In other words, the eye of their hearts has opened up to the realm of intuitional presence and witness (of God).

¹³⁵ Source: www.shsh.ir

The Traits of a Man of God, in Practice

If I want to describe a few of the more important qualifications of these spiritual men, the following characteristics will come to mind first:

- 1- They are highly capable of influencing talented souls with their charismatic power in training and self-building them. All human selfishness is due to one's self-love; you will not attain anything (make no spiritual achievements) unless you turn to be a lover of God. "... He loves them, and they love Him." (5:57)

- 2- They demonstrate compassion and mercy towards all creatures and cure people as divine physicians. Love is the elixir of self-building and enrichment. Love of God Almighty cures all moral vileness entirely and presents all good attributes as a whole to the lover. The elixir of love makes the lover so enamored of the beloved that every other association with anything and anyone else except God is broken off. In the Whispered Prayer of lovers, which is attributed to Imam Sajjad, the fourth Imam of Shias, we read:
*My God, who can have tasted the sweetness of Thy love, then wanted another in place of thee? Who can have become intimate with Thy nearness, then sought removal from thee?*¹³⁶

- 3- They emphasize obeying God and refraining from carnal desires. They believe that the wisdom behind creating man is his Divine vice-regency, serving the people of God on earth. (2:30) They respect with dignity every human-being, young and old, man and woman, learned or illiterate, clergy or laity, nobility or ... any persons. And they love all the people regardless of their race, color, religion, or nationality. Once, man attains this station, he can carry out Divine acts. The way to reach this place is through obeying God and opposing carnal desires. In this respect, it is quoted in a Divine (*Qudsi*) hadith:

O son of Adam! I created everything for you and created you for Myself. ¹³⁷

¹³⁶ *The Psalms of Islam (al-Sahifah al-Sajjadiyya)*, IX, 77: 248.

¹³⁷ *Sharh-i Asma-i Husna*, I, 139: 202; *Rasa 'il-i Karaki*, III, 962.

- 4- Their eyes work for God, so, it becomes “Eye of Allah,” their ears work for God, so, it becomes “Ear of Allah,” if the hand works for God, it becomes “Hand of Allah,” and so forth to the heart of man, which is God's place; as narrated:

*The heart of a believer is the Throne of Allah, the compassionate.*¹³⁸

And as Imam Hussein (a) says:

*O Lord! You made Your lover's hearts the station of Your Will and Providence.*¹³⁹

All those who have been delivered from the snares of *nafs* and Satan, by tearing apart the heart's veils, are able to observe the *Malakut* (Kingdom) of the heavens and the earth, and to bear witness to the Oneness of the Sacred Essence of God.

There is no God but He: That is the witness of Allah, His angels, and those endowed with knowledge... (3:18)

- 5- The real pitfall of love of God is the love of the world. The following hadith in which the reality of the world is revealed to Jesus Christ is very popular among the Muslim mystics:

*The reality of the world was revealed to Jesus Christ. He saw it as an old woman (hag) that had lost all her teeth and had all (types of) ornaments on her. He asked her: ‘How many husbands have you got?’ She said: ‘I have not counted!’ His holiness asked: ‘Have all your husbands died or have they divorced you?’ She replied: ‘No, rather I have killed them!’ Jesus Christ said: ‘Woe to your future husbands who have not taken a lesson from your past husbands; how you killed them one by one and they did not distance themselves from you!’*¹⁴⁰

- 6- At the peak of his God-Seeking, man worships God on the basis of affection rather than out of desire for the Paradise or fear of the Hell, the same way as Imam Sadiq, the sixth Imam of Shias, said about his own worship:

¹³⁸ Allamah Majlesi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, LVIII, 39.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, LXXXV, 214.

¹⁴⁰ *Tanbih al-Khawatir*: I, 146. See also, *Mizan al-Hikmah*, IV, 1744: 6010.

In worship of the Almighty and Glorious God, people are in three groups: one group worship Him for reward, which is the worship of the greedy and that is avarice; the other group worship Him out of fear of the Hell, which is the worship of the slaves and that is fearfulness; but I worship the Almighty and Glorious God out of love and affection for Him which is the worship of the noble, and that is the source of safety and security, for the Almighty and Glorious God says: 'And they are secure of that Day's fear.' (3:89) Thus, whoever loves Almighty and Glorious Allah, He would love him too and whoever is loved by Almighty and Glorious Allah, he will be secure (of the terror of the Judgment Day).¹⁴¹

- 7- They have achieved the highest level of "piety." Piety has certain levels; the lowest level is performing the obligations and avoiding the prohibited, which is fine and appropriate for some people; but there are at the highest levels of piety which demand avoiding anything other than Allah, that is caring for nothing in the heart except for love of God. If man keeps the eye of his heart away from anything other than God, He will grace him with radiance and will introduce him with the fundamentals of divinity. In a hadith, the Imam Sadiq says:
A submissive and pure heart is one that meets the Lord while there is nothing in it other than Him; and every heart in which there is polytheism or doubt it is defective (and diseased).¹⁴²

They place a special emphasis on "benevolence to people" in creating proximity to God and loving Him. He believed that the means to the love of God is affection for God's creatures and serving people, especially the oppressed and the ones facing a great problem or threat. The Holy Prophet is quoted as saying:

People are the family of God; the most favorite person with God is the one who is the most beneficial to the family of God and who makes them happy.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ *Mizan al-Hikmah*, VII, 3418: 11647.

¹⁴² *Ibid.* X, 4684: 16930.

¹⁴³ *Usul Al-Kafi*, II, 164: 6.

In another hadith it is narrated that the Prophet was asked: 'Who is the most favorite person with God?' The Holy Prophet replied:

*The one who is the most beneficial to the people.*¹⁴⁴

8- An important aspect that is stressed in Islamic traditions in relation to giving alms and doing good to people is giving alms in poverty. The Holy Prophet said:

*There are three signs to faithfulness: Giving alms in poverty; equity toward people; and imparting knowledge to the seekers of knowledge.*¹⁴⁵

9- They regard enjoyment of special Divine Guidance as one of the most significant blessings of sincerity. Accordingly, by virtue of the verse,

And those who strive in Our cause -We will certainly guide them. (29:69)

10- They see themselves in all states in the presence of the God Almighty. And this is in fact the instructive and significant words of the Holy Prophet who said:

*Remember God by the khamil dhikr. He was asked: 'What is khamil dhikr?' He replied: The silent and covert dhikr.*¹⁴⁶

11- One of the most important instructions of the Heavenly People is planning regular periods to spend in seclusion with God for supplications and whispered prayers, which they refer to as "begging at the doorstep of God" and stress reciting supplications for an hour every night – even if you are not in the right mood for it, do not give up seclusion with God. They whisper supplications such as *Duaye Kumail*,¹⁴⁷ *Tawassul*,¹⁴⁸ *Nudba*¹⁴⁹, and so on.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 164: 7.

¹⁴⁵ *Mizan al-Hikmah*, XIII, 6452: 20664.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., IV, 1856: 6454.

¹⁴⁷ A prayer which is said was taught by Imam Ali to one his disciples, Kumayl. Shias usually whisper this prayer collectively every Thursday night in the mosques.

¹⁴⁸ A prayer in which, Shias ask intercession by the Prophet and his beloved Household every Tuesday night.

¹⁴⁹ A Friday morning prayer in which, Shias call their savior Mahdi to come.

¹⁵⁰ A collection of these supplications is provided in Shayikh Abbas Qomi's *Mafatih al-Jinan*.

12- They believe that if one has a real longing for God and is not content with other than Him, the Almighty God will eventually undertake his affairs and lead him to a sublime destination. As in the Quran we can see,

But We shall be sure to guide to Our ways those who strive hard for Our cause: God is with those who do good. (29:69)

13- They believe that as a lover enjoys talking to his beloved, a performer of prayers also should enjoy amorous whispering to his lord. The Holy Prophet described his joy in prayers as follows:

Allah-Great is His Adoration-made the delight of my eyes in prayers and made prayers beloved to me as He made food beloved to the hungry and water beloved to the thirsty; (with the difference that) when the hungry eats he will be satiated and when the thirsty drinks he will be quenched, but I never get satiated (or quenched) from (performing) prayers.¹⁵¹

14- To be courteous in the presence of the Almighty Lord by performers of prayer is one of the issues that Islam has greatly stressed. Imam Sajjad said in this relation:

The right accorded to prayer is that you should know prayer as entering the presence of Allah the Most High, and that, when saying prayer, you are standing before the Most High Allah. So, knowing this, you should stand in prayer as an abased and humble servant, eagerly devoted, hopefully fearful, helplessly lamenting; and proceed to prayer peacefully and gracefully with great respect to the One you are standing before, and perform it whole-heartedly with (full) observance of its rules and rights.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ *Mizan al-Hikmah*, VII, 3092: 10535.

¹⁵² *Ibid.* VII, 3124: 10669.

**A Glance at the meetings on “The Heavenly People on the Earth”
Tehran, Iran**



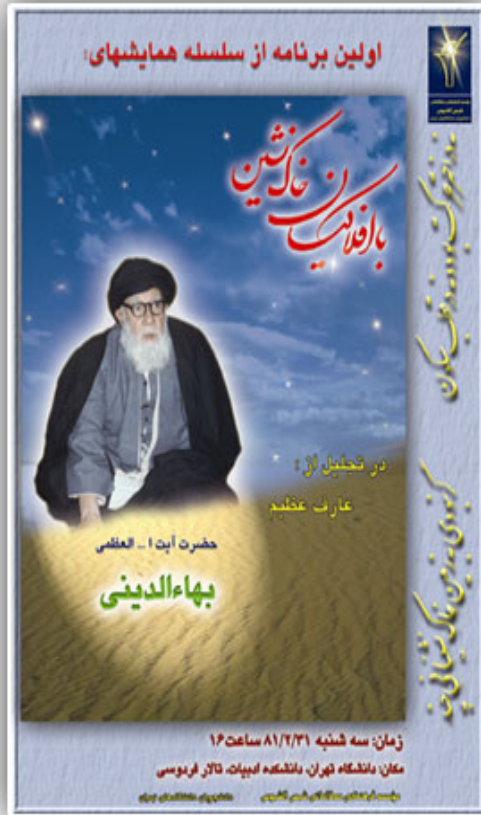
The first frame, from the left on the upper row, shows the late Dulabi's picture.



These pictures show how much the spiritual movement of the contemporary Iranian mystics has been welcomed by the university professors and students.

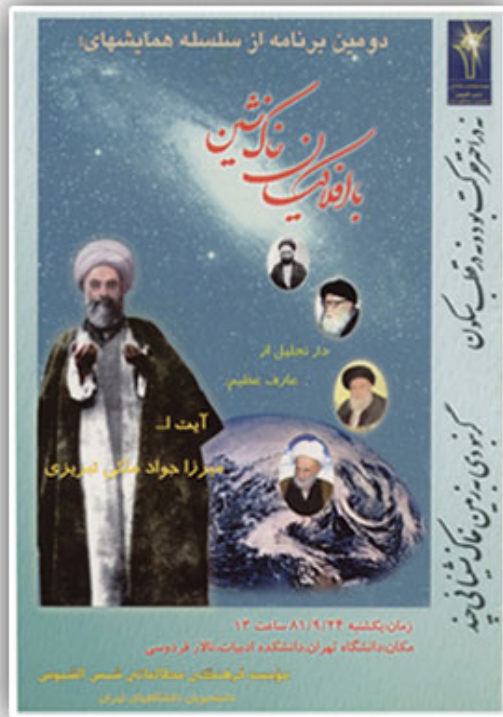


A Survey of the Eleven Sessions were held at the Tehran Universities



First session

The first program from the series focused on the deceased Ayatollah Seyyed Reza Baha al-Dini (d. 1997). It took place at the University of Tehran with over 2,500 participants on May 21, 2002. The audience was addressed by Dr. Sheikh al-Islam, Dr. Amini, Ayatollah Amjad, Ayatollah Ganji, Ayatollah Fateminia, and Ayatollah Mostafavi, one of Ayatollah Baha al-Dini's pupils, about the greatness of the deceased Ayatollah.

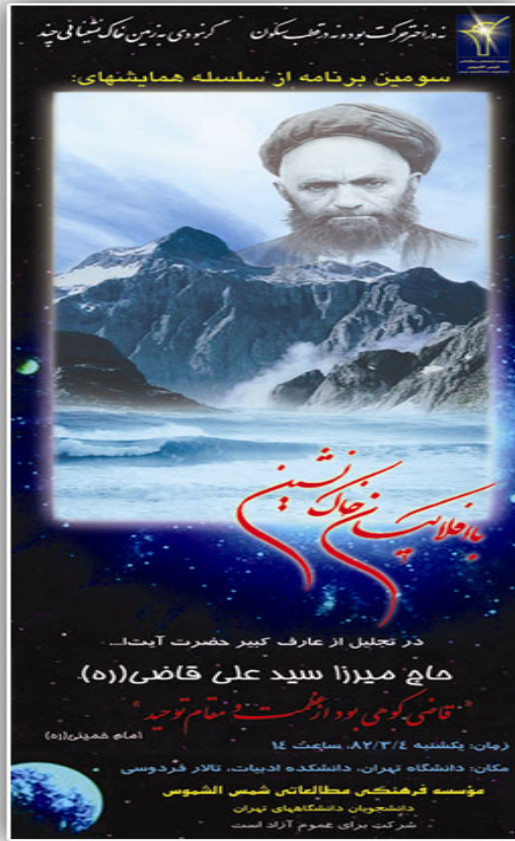


Second session

The second session happened in regard to Ayatollah Mirza Javad Aqa Maleki Tabrizi (d. 1922) in the University of Tehran on December 15, 2002. This session was well received and hosted more than 2,500 people including well ranked theologians such as Dr. A'vani¹⁵³ and Ayatollah Fateminia.¹⁵⁴

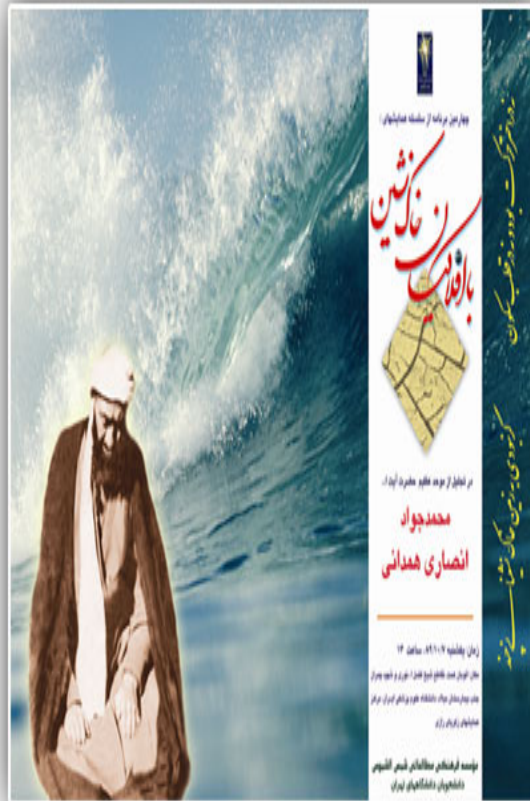
¹⁵³ The former president of the Academy of Philosophy of Iran.

¹⁵⁴ One of the most popular religious preachers in Tehran.



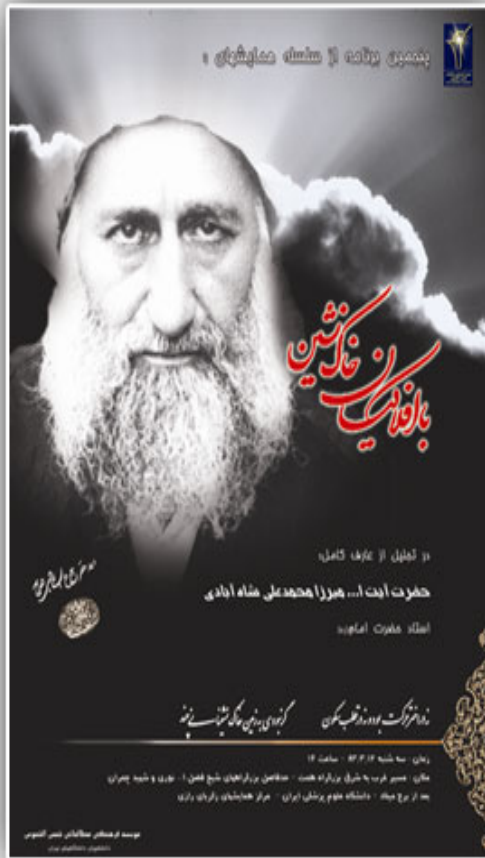
Third session

The third session of the series happened on May 25, 2003 focusing on Ayatollah Seyed Ali Ghazi Tabataba'i (d. 1945). The event also took place at Ferdowsi Hall, University of Tehran, and the eager audience filled the hall.



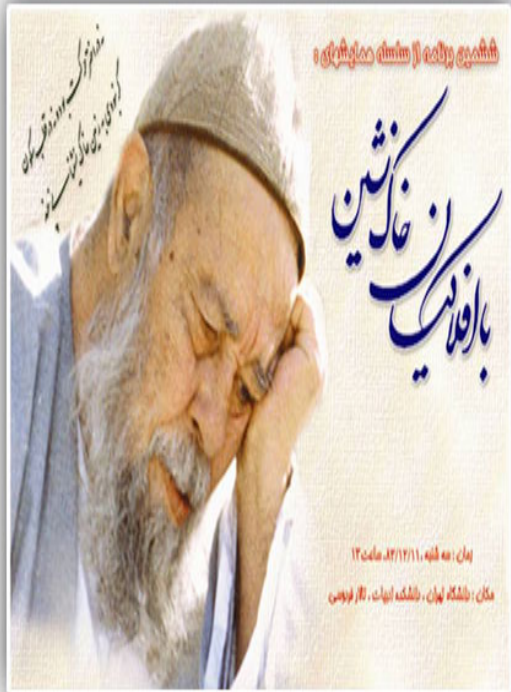
Fourth session

The fourth session focused on Ayatollah Ansari Hamedani (d. 1918) on December 28, 2003. The event took place in R’azi Center, Iran University of Medical Sciences, and reached its capacity of 3,000 people. At this event, masters such as Ayatollah Seyed Mahdi Dastgheib, Ayatollah Fateminia and Sadooghi Soha spoke of the glory of that deceased ayatollah.



Fifth session

The fifth session focused on Ayatollah Mohammad Ali Shah Abadi (d. 1948) and took place in R'azi Center, Iran University of Medical Sciences, on June 1, 2004.



Sixth session

The sixth session was in celebration of Ayatollah Seyed Abdolkarim Kashmiri (d. 1998). This session took place in the University of Tehran on March 1, 2005.



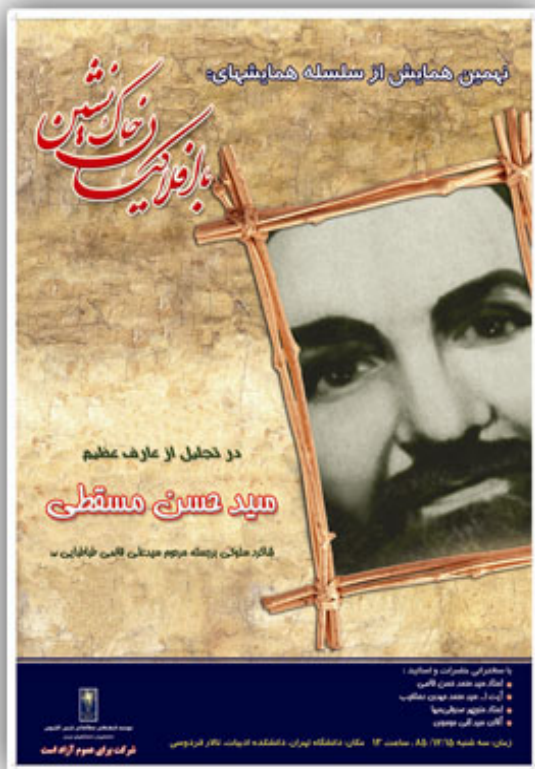
Seventh session

The seventh session was held on December 2005 again in the University of Tehran. This session took place in honor of Ayatollah Seyyed Mohammad Hassan Elahi Tabataba'ii (d. 1967).



Eighth session

The eighth session was in respect for Seyed Hashem Haddad (d. 1993) and took place on May 30, 2006 in the University of Tehran. The program was widely welcomed by the 3,000 participants.



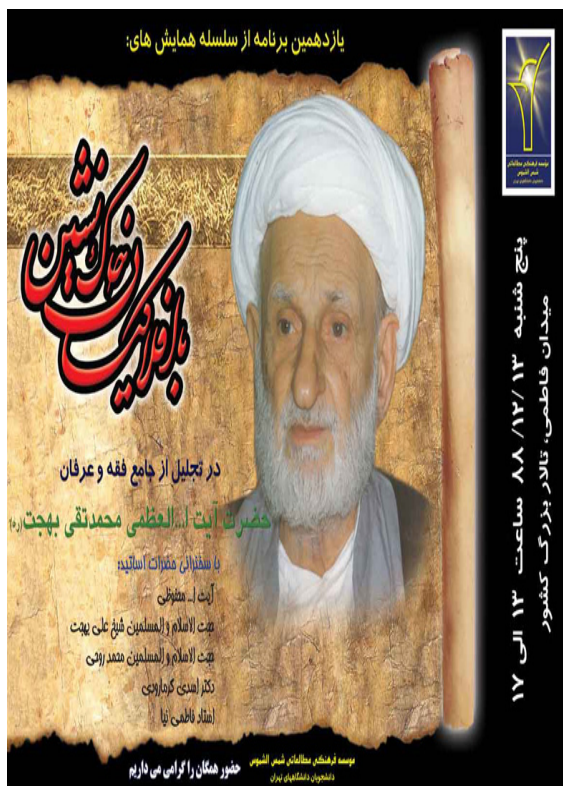
Ninth session

The ninth session took place on March 6, 2007. The focus of this session was on Ayatollah Seyed Hassan Masqati (d. 1929). The event was held in the University of Tehran.



Tenth session

The tenth session took place on December 2007 at the Ministry of Interior Hall. Sheikh Jafar Mojtahedi (d. 1995) was the focus of the event. There was poetry and prayers given to the Lord in respect for this great ayatollah. The event hosted more than 8,000 people who came to celebrate this great ayatollah.



Eleventh session

An exaltation of Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Bahjat (d. 2009) marked the eleventh session in the series which took place on February 24, 2010, also in the Ministry of Interior Hall. The event hosted more than 7,000 people from all over the country, including many high ranking theologians and clerics who talked about the Ayatollah’s spiritual life and deeds. There were also parts of his speech played for the audience.

Conclusion

Humans suffer in different ways, misfortunes, loneliness, death, and ... Medicine, as the art of physical and psychological curing, cannot heal spiritual human suffering, his definitive suffering: the loss of eternal life. Holy Texts, such as the Quran are the great books that address suffering and healing. As we saw in this research, the most fundamental human pain and suffering are caused by his forgetfulness of God and his sin. The first step for our return journey to God begins by recognizing the God-given dignity and sacredness of human beings, "the others." In the story of Abraham's Tent we saw how we are obliged to redirect our love and look outwards to the others. Religions, specifically the Abrahamic ones, work to bridge the gap between God and human beings. The bridge that the Prophets make is nothing but spreading love, compassion and forgiveness in human society. Love as the main source of the energy that drives the quest for integration; transformation is the spiritual instrument that leads us to abandon all notions of severe dualism, division and rivalry. Love is the only way to truly overcome the pain of anxiety and alienation in our lives: to attain the authentic life, to find the way back home, to get closer to God. Love brings to our souls permanent peace and true happiness. "Human suffering evokes *compassion*; it also evokes *respect* for the other."¹⁵⁵

I have tried in this study to offer some inspiring moments from the life of Rev. Haji Ismael Dulabi and other contemporary religious healers in Iran as exemplars promoting the atmosphere of compassion and love in the Shiite community of Iran. Different from political Islam which too often speaks of revenge for wrongs suffered in the past, this spiritual tradition functions as God's healing balm and mercy on Iranians afflicted by extremism.

I hope that this little book can awaken in the reader a sense of the fundamental importance of love, compassion, and forgiveness for religion in general and for Shia Islam in particular. May the reader be blessed by the words and example of the late Dulabi and all the Heavenly People on the Earth!

¹⁵⁵ *Salvifici Doloris*, Apostical Letter of Pope John Paul II on the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering, 11 February 1984, article 4.

Some Selected Words of Rev. Dulabi:

In a quotation from the Almighty God we read: 'I was a hidden treasure. I wished that I be realized. Therefore, I created creation that I be realized.' This quotation narrates a fact that the Eternal Being does not like to remain hidden, and therefore, He wished to have subjects who would be representations of Him in beauty, greatness and love, and so also this quotation seems to contain an essence of that verse and word of God in the Quran which says: 'O those who have believed, if anyone among you should turn away from the creed of God, God will soon bring a nation who are loved by God and He is loved by them.' The delicate point present in this verse is that a true religion is one which creates mutual love and friendship between God and His creatures and it seems it is an eternal covenant which God has committed Himself to; i.e. love and be loved.

*Before this green roof and the blue arch was straightened,
the enjoyment of my eyes was the beauty of my Lord God,
from the dawn of eternity until its dusk,
friendship and love had one covenant and one commitment.*

Love means the way of nature, the way of the heart. When the thoughts go beyond the talk of the material body then it is in the domain of the heart. When you get involved with the heart the material aspect of the body goes into oblivion.... Heart is the main platform for rising towards God. Heart was the chief podium of the prophets and saints and goodhearted.

If God wills, someday your heart will laugh so loudly that you also will be able to hear its laughter. It means that you have become pleased with God. When one reaches this stage he has become qualified; sorrow now has no way into him; he has cleansed his heart's abode; it means that God has landed in his heart.

What an ecstasy I was in, that I did not know who my visitor was?

Who He was and what was this wine?

O my heart, complain not about hurdles like a closed bud,

As the gentle wind has brought the hurdle remover.

A good lover from his beloved, a good disciple from his master, a good student from his teacher, extract knowledge and realization. A good seeker extracts knowledge from the correct believers of God. He is more particular about being sincere and respectful rather than just hearing and other things.

If you are having a match box, see if you own it or you are owned by it. If you are owned by the things of this world, it will be always telling you 'take care of me that I am not stolen away.' He will be constantly commanding you. But if you be its owner then you sleep comfortably. It will not be commanding you. Even if anyone takes it away, anyway you are its owner. Even if it falls in various hands still you are its true owner. If it does not reach you in this world, in the next world it will certainly reach you. The edict of God never gets defunct. Your true belonging never exits from your ownership, except when you give it away or sell it away or live it for your inheritors. If one becomes a slave of the materials of this world, these materials are useless for its temporary owner when the owner passes away. But if one is master of the materials of this world his honor is preserved, otherwise even if all the things on earth belong to him, it has no value for him if he be slave of the materials of this world. Being the slave of this world, slave of wealth, women, prestige, income, and bread and cloth, is not consistent with seeking self-respect and honor.

God has specified a great price for you. Only God knows the price of his creatures. Only God can make us know what price we have. The pot maker who has made the pot knows well how much the pot has cost him to make it. The designer of mankind knows very well what the price of mankind is. God created mankind according to a principle, and said 'I have created everything else for you.' This is the value of mankind. Why does man become the slave of other than God and dishonor God by it?! "I have created you for myself. i.e. for the qualities, virtues, and behavior of Myself. I have created you similar to My own nature.

The more a man seeks and the good visit him and enter his heart and soul, his heart becomes more spacious. The more you remember the good, the richer becomes your heart. Our heart should become very spacious. For it is a place where God will take abode in it. God has said: "The sky and earth are too small for me as My home. Only the heart of a clean-hearted believing subject is the most suitable place for Me to reside.

The divine world is not like this natural world. You will find your path into the divine through the divine. This road is very short, but people spent all their time to find a remote star in the natural world. Where are they spending their time? Now that you are searching for a star, then see if you yourself are not one such star? Now that you are visiting the moon, then see if you are not a moon yourself? Man searches not his own self. Search your own self which is the outlet of the vision and knowledge of your wisdom. All skies of the divine and the material worlds are present in your own self, all these are hidden in your own self.

I hope God will open some of His doors upon you while you are still in this world. But do you know the way for achieving this? It is same thing that I told you so far; you must amend your relationship with God. All of us should pray for each other. Amending means making peace with God. In order to make peace universal and to stop wars, the first step is to stop the war of man with God. No war is worse than this. When man is fighting with God it is very deploring. May the wars with God get stopped, which means we should not have any fight with God, we should not be demanding with God. When this war is stopped with God, it is peace.

He who realizes his self, he has realized God. It means that his self itself is the reservoir of good qualities and attitudes. Every quotation or proverb that you read in the books, its reservoir lies in your own self, the source is in your own self. Just make a little effort and the worldly dust and debris that has got collected over it will go aside and then you will be able to exploit this rich reservoir and quench your thirst by it. You need not anymore take your pot here and there.

God has prohibited you from selling yourself to this world. He said, close your eyes upon other people's wealth and be content with what He has given you. God will delicately save your strength until you get over the mountain-pass, and when you fall on the normal road, you will see that God has been saving you all the time from pitfalls and you will be feeling happy and light now. You will feel as if God is interested only in you upon this earth.

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