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THE POSSIBILITY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN ISLAMIC THEOLOGY

Mustapha Tajdin¹

Abstract

In the present article, the author explores the possibility of religious experience from the perspective of Islamic theology. The article seeks to unearth the seeds of religious subjectivism in Islam based on a theoretical framework grounded in the modern concept of religious experience. The practical aim of this undertaking is to escape the pitfalls of religious traditionalism on the one hand, and to repudiate the claim that Islam is ill disposed towards spirituality on the other hand. At the core of any religion, there is the individual's encounter with the Divine. The emphasis on the personal spiritual experience would help Humanist and Universalist discourses on religion to lay the foundations for fruitful interfaith interactions, and reformulate theological systems, mainly the Islamic one, in order to respond positively to the challenges of globalisation and the threats of both extremism and exclusivism.

Keywords: *Ash'arism, Ghazālī, Kalam, Islamic Theology, Religious Experience, Sufism.*

Theology and Experience

Modern Western theologians have grappled with two pressing issues: the status of experience in theological inquiry and its function in theological systems. Their interest in this important topic has rendered the experiential model of approaching religion a dominant perspective in contemporary theology.² However, the views that

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² George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a*

account for experience across the broad spectrum of theological schools have failed thus far to reach the desired consensus.³ This is because theology and experience have been neighbours, yet, strangers to one another for a long period. In other words, religious experience, in its subjective form, did not constitute an independent topic in classical theology.⁴ Moreover, modern scholarship has emphasised the subjectivity of religious experience at the expense of well-structured doctrines and systematic theologies.⁵ This by no means implies the absence of individual experience as the core of religiosity throughout human history. In fact, many modern theologians who support the experiential model agree that religious experience is essentially the same across different religions.⁶ The turn to religious experience, Wayne Proudfoot argues, “was motivated in large measure by an interest in freeing religious doctrine

Post-Liberal Age (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 31.

³ David S. Koonce, *Theology and Experience: A Critical Evaluation of William Van Roo's Contribution to a Wider Conversation* (PhD Diss., Pontifical Athenaeum Regina Apostolorum, 2013), 1. See also Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 31.

⁴ This applies also to modern non-theological approaches to religious experience as is the case with William James in his seminal work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). He divides religious propensities into two types: institutional with well-defined doctrines and individual with subjective and original experiences. According to him, it is in the latter that religious experience is clearly achieved and expressed. See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London: Routledge, [1902] 2002), 11. However, only few efforts from within theology proper have been devoted to the topic of religious experience. One is compelled to mention here the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher who locates the core of religion in the immediate knowledge one gets from contemplating the finite and temporal entities of the universe, what Schleiermacher calls the immediate consciousness of the universal existence of all finite things, in and through the Infinite, and of all temporal things, in and through the Eternal. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. John Oman, (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co, 1893), 36. Other theologians namely Jonathan Edwards and Rudolf Otto support this line of thought. See Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985), 7.

⁵ Adnan Aslan, “What is Wrong with the Concept of Religious Experience?” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 14, no 3 (2003): 299–312. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410305263>.

⁶ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 32.

and practice from dependence on metaphysical beliefs and ecclesiastical institutions and grounding it in human experience.”⁷

The term “experience” is one of those weasel words that carry a wide range of meanings and escape, quite cunningly, the hard traps of definitions. In its ordinary use, experience refers to the practical wisdom obtained through one’s exposure to some reality.⁸ It could also mean whatever knowledge we get through the application of the five senses. Some philosophers view experience as first-hand knowledge before it is subject to critical analysis and evaluation.⁹ Within the empiricist paradigm, experience is reduced to conscious responses to an outside tangible reality. Psychoanalysts who emphasise pre-conscious as well as unconscious responses to reality have challenged this last perspective.¹⁰ For theologians, experience denotes the direct contact with any entity, concrete or abstract, and the knowledge that ensues therefrom. If this is true, then theology, particularly the Islamic, as a well-defined discipline needs to undergo significant changes in order to appeal to this paradigmatic shift. In all Abrahamic faiths, theology serves as the theoretical framework for doctrinal systemisation. Through speculation, which draws mainly on philosophy, theological conceptions often grow into well-defined and highly structured dogmas embraced by a given community of faith. It is on these grounds that religious experience is intuitively seen as the opposite to theology because what we experience is “prior to all conceptualisation or cognition.”¹¹ Yet, this view oversimplifies and glosses over the complexities of how religious doctrines emerge and grow before they turn into fossilised dogmas. Any doctrine, however rigid it is now, had been an intense human experience before it received approval from the believing community. Donald L. Gelpi argues that religious experience, as a body of interpretations of a given tradition, tends to lay claim to authority in order to manipulate other experiences.¹² No sooner is the authoritative character of an

⁷ Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, xiii.

⁸ Donald L. Gelpi, *The Turn to Experience in Contemporary Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 2.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹¹ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 32.

¹² Gelpi, *The Turn to Experience in Contemporary Theology*, 10.

experience challenged by another one than the authoritative gives way to the authoritarian, which forfeits moral authority by an appeal to coercion and force.¹³ Moreover, any religious experience begins as a genuine response to some spiritual, ordinary or at times extraordinary events before it starts constructing abstract concepts to account for that response. Some scholars have deployed a Kantian bi-polar understanding according to which experience assumes perceptual and interpretive roles.¹⁴ This mirrors well the rise and growth of all theological systems. Not only does theology involve philosophical speculations, but it also presents its postulates in a hypothetico-deductive way.¹⁵ In modern theology, two central terms account for the above-mentioned dichotomy. They are orthopraxy and orthodoxy.¹⁶

The Potentials of Religious Experience in Islam

An important topic frequently discussed in human and social sciences concerns the legitimacy of addressing issues specific to one cultural system as if they were readily applicable to another cultural system. Actually, religious experience is a new Western concept that surfaced because of some intellectuals' effort to defend religion against the late eighteenth century Romanticism and the attacks of Positivism and Scientific Materialism of the nineteenth century. For example, Schleiermacher in *On Religion*¹⁷ evokes the experiential dimension of religion in order to convince his contemporary artists of Berlin that what they held in contempt was not religion *per se* but the dogmas and doctrines of institutional Christianity.¹⁸ William James's

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ali Şaban Düzgün, "Contextualizing the Term 'Religious Experience' in Theological Discourse," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15, no. 4 (2004): 497–514.

¹⁶ Gelpi, *The Turn to Experience in Contemporary Theology*, 24.

¹⁷ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion*.

¹⁸ Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 2. Schleiermacher, elsewhere, advanced his criticism against science as being unable to account for what is individual and subjective. He criticized also pure empiricism for its inadequacy to distinguish between the essential and the permanent on the one hand, and the changeable and the contingent on the other hand. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*

recourse to experience to prove the vitality of religion was a reaction against the advances made by science as an alternative to religion.¹⁹ Thus, religious experience is an invention of the modern West and, accordingly, employs concepts that have a particular history and are culture specific.²⁰ Such being the case, the question whether or not we are allowed to translate religious experience into the language of Islamic tradition remains an important problem of methodology.²¹ However, such a problem is resolved once we distinguish between what a term connotes and what it denotes.²² The meaning of any expression is divided into two categories: The first one refers to the attributes associated with that expression in the mind regardless of its real existence in the world outside the mind. This association concerns the intentional meaning of the expression. When we, for instance, refer to religious experience as subjective, universal, or affective, these attributes are cognitive and mental. In this case, religious experience assumes culturally specific connotations. The second one applies to what the expression refers to in the real world. Hence, religious experience might denote a variety of external experiences across religions. Here, religious experience becomes a universal event that applies, although variably, to different contexts and cultures.

Religion is usually viewed as an organised body of dicta and often referred to as institutional. Most of the time, this view – as in the case of Islam – encompasses not only legal maxims but also the articles of faith. In Islamic theology, long discussions have centred on the distinction between *Islām* (the outward) and *Imān* (the inward). The former being about the physical adherence to religion while the latter, which is usually rendered into English as faith, goes deeper into one's real and heartfelt convictions.

Within Islam, one notices a variation of perspective between the Quran and the whole religious discourse that developed around it.

(London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2016), 3–4.

¹⁹ Aslan, “What is Wrong with the Concept of Religious Experience?”

²⁰ Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 184–85.

²¹ Aslan, “What is Wrong with the Concept of Religious Experience?”

²² Alan Cruse, *Meaning in Language: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 21–22.

While the Quran avoids any attempt at a uniform system of beliefs and emphasises, instead, a theocentric and teleological perspective to life, Islamic religious sciences embarked on a long and painstaking task of laying down the essential principles of law (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) and theology (*uṣūl al-dīn or kalām*). The processes of doctrinal codification are “secondary or tertiary phenomena. They come after, whether in time or in their inner logic, the primary symbols which express the belonging of man to the sacred.”²³ Thus, theology refers to the process of a symbolic codification that transforms immediate precepts into organised concepts, which, in turn, give birth to what we usually call doctrine.²⁴

Some Muslim intellectuals have endeavoured to explore the possibility of religious experience in Islam. The article entitled *The Essence of Religious Experience in Islam* (1973) by the late Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi deserves some attention here. Unwaveringly, Faruqi presupposes not only the possibility of religious experience to exist in Islam but also the fact that it is knowable and readily grasped.²⁵ It appears that Faruqi uses the term in a unique way. For him, religious experience is synonymous with religion as a whole. For this reason, he argues that Muslim thinkers since the Middle Ages never questioned the fact that Islam has an essence that orbits God as its principal centre.²⁶ Hence, Faruqi levels a systematic criticism against Wilfred C. Smith who claims that Islam has no essence of its own based on his interpretation of the word Islam as it occurs in the Quran.²⁷ According to Smith, Faruqi maintains, Islam is neither an entity nor a religious system in a reified sense.²⁸ Rather, it is a verbal noun meaning submission, obedience, and surrender of one's will to God. Although Faruqi acquiesces in this interpretation, he contends that Islam means more than submission.²⁹ It is a system of religious

²³ Aziz Esmail, *The Poetics of Religious Experience: The Islamic Context* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 16.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁵ Ismail R. Faruqi, “The Essence of Religious Experience in Islam,” *Numen* 20, no. 3 (1973): 186–201.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

propositions, commands, rituals, and prohibitions, and this is exactly, Faruqi implies, what sets Islam apart from other religions and confers on it a specific identity.³⁰ Faruqi's argument is valid so long as Islam is defined in hindsight, not as an emerging faith but as a theologically and legally developed system over a considerable period.

Faruqi locates the essence of religious experience in the concept of God for which the confessional statement *shahāda* is the expression.³¹ He provides a succinct account about two Islamic views on God: one advocated by the philosophers like Averroes (Ibn Rushd), and another supported by the theologians like al-Ghazālī.³² Briefly, the former emphasises God's transcendence within a broader perspective in which the material world behaves according to unchanging cosmic laws. The latter thinks of the philosophers' view to be tantamount to declaring the death of God, because once we ascribe every natural event to some given physical laws instead of God's active will, we cease to believe in the omnipotent God and we, instead, start believing in a *deus otiosus*.³³ Faruqi appears to subscribe to the theological view neither because of its logical validity nor because of the truth of its propositions, but rather owing to its openness to generate in the believers the feelings of dependence and awe *vis-à-vis* God's active and capricious will. Implicitly, Faruqi believes, and rightly so, that the doctrine of Occasionalism is the gate to commune with God and acknowledge his omnipotence and omnipresence. Unfortunately, Faruqi's understanding of religious experience hinders the flow of his ideas from hitting the mark. For him, religious experience is the doctrinal and historical development of Islam or, more accurately, everything that Islam was, is, and will be is worthy of the term "religious experience."

Adnan Aslan's article *What is Wrong with The Concept of Religious Experience?* is another interesting work.³⁴ It reflects the traditional legalistic perspective whose main concern is to evaluate new concepts against already structured Islamic doctrines and

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Adnan Aslan, "What Is Wrong with the Concept of Religious Experience?"

emphasise the variations between Islam and Secularism or at least modern views that have recently crept into religious studies. Aslan's cautious attitude *vis-à-vis* the concept of religious experience stems from an often-reiterated caveat within modern Islamic discourse to the effect that what is specific to the West is doomed to do disservice to our understanding when it is transplanted in an alien territory such as the Islamic cultural milieu.³⁵

Another problem, Aslan argues, is the secular provenance of "religious experience" being the product of a long process of privatisation of religion rooted in the worldview of modern enlightenment.³⁶ According to Aslan, this secular origin of the term requires us to question its adequacy to account for religious phenomena of non-modern religions, including traditional Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.³⁷ In fact, modern terminology, when applied to olden events, is bound to project back concerns alien to these events. However, this shortcoming occurs only at the level of conceptualisation;³⁸ that is

³⁵ Aslan, "What is Wrong with the Concept of Religious Experience?", 301.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Aslan argues that Western thought is plagued with the problem of conceptualisation, which means, according to him, the attempt to understand a phenomenon by fielding it within the boundaries of some mental abstractions called concepts and thus creating an obstacle between matter and thinker. Aslan ascribes this tradition to Kant who emphasised the importance of concepts in human understanding. I personally find Aslan's claims absurd, for how can we conceive of understanding without concepts? Aslan could have been right had he utilised a more appropriate term than conceptualisation because it is not exclusively a Western phenomenon since human knowledge is imbedded in concepts. He could have called it formalism according to which the validity of a given line of propositions is assessed exclusively against its formal consistency rather than against the truth-value of the content of these propositions. Moreover, I do not see why Kant is considered responsible for this "Western malaise" since conceptualisation as a mental exercise oriented towards categorisation can be traced as far back as Aristotle and we all know how central this figure is in the development of Western thought. It is within Aristotelian epistemology that knowledge is claimed to be established on two distinct methodologies: inductive and deductive. While the former furnishes us with a knowledge rooted in our acquaintance with concrete particulars, the latter provides the basis for the intellect's conceptualisation of universal principles from which knowledge springs. For more details, see Murat Aydede, "Aristotle on Episteme and

forcing a phenomenon into a given mental category that grew along a different trajectory. On the contrary, even when some ancient events evade being subsumed under some unfamiliar conceptual categories, they can be comfortably analysed and scrutinised by modern tools because they are essentially human phenomena. Hence, if the modern privatization of religion owes its emergence to secular concepts, it cannot be discarded as an inherent property of religiosity that had always been there even before the first seeds of secularism ever sprouted.³⁹

Aslan adamantly rejects any possibility of religious experience within the context of Islam, given its inadequacy to grasp fully the significance of many religious phenomena and its misrepresentation of their meaning.⁴⁰ He lists some areas of Islamic practices and beliefs to illustrate the insufficiency of the experiential approach to account for them such as obligatory (*farā'id*) and voluntary (*nawāfil*) rituals, sincere behaviour, ecstasy, intellectual and theological contemplation, revelation, and mystical vision.⁴¹

Another criticism Aslan hurls against the concept of religious experience is his claim that the experience of the divine goes beyond the cognitive faculties of the mind to intimately embrace the divine via human senses or perception.⁴² If this were the case, then, religious experience, Aslan contends, would be nothing but a figment of imagination or at least a wrong mental construction because the divine cannot be grasped by finite and material beings. Although Aslan expresses his rejection of religious experience on the ground of its non-existence in classical religious terminology,⁴³ he is

Nous: The Posterior Analytics," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 36, no. 1 (1998): 15–46.

³⁹ The Quran provides many indications that the ultimate purpose of the human soul is individual salvation. It is true that the Quran emphasises social and communal dimensions of faith but it would be a one-sided perspective to overlook the private dimensions of religious devotion in the Quran. There are verses in the Muslims' scripture that highlight the importance of individual redemption. See, for example, *The Quran*, 19: 95; 80: 34–37.

⁴⁰ Aslan, "What is Wrong with the Concept of Religious Experience?"

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

comfortable with some familiar Islamic descriptions of one's direct understanding of God such as the term *ma'rifat Allah*, which literally means knowing God. Aslan appears to contradict his above-mentioned claim that the finite cannot grasp the infinite since the Arabic word *ma'rifa* connotes a direct way of knowing when compared with the word *'ilm*, another word for knowledge. Hence, if knowing God directly is possible in classical Islamic theology, why is it not the case with experience? Even when Aslan accepts experience as an expression of one's spiritual reaction to the Divine, he justifies its legitimacy based on the Quran rather than on the content and significance of such an experience *per se*.⁴⁴ The source of Aslan's confusion, I surmise, is his identification of religious experience as an objective reality within the broader corpus of Islamic rituals. In other words, Aslan would like us to believe that unless the Quran endorses a given religious expression of faith, one is obliged to preclude it as an illegitimate expression of spirituality. Even when religious experience is fulfilled through an intense subjective spiritual involvement, Aslan downgrades its significance and questions its legitimacy on the ground that its existence has no objective value that can be verified.⁴⁵

In fact, any spiritual experience is supposed to spring from the subject of that experience rather than from some already given religious dicta. This is exactly what Schleiermacher toiled to explain.⁴⁶ Hence, the assertion that religious experience is rejected when applied to some areas of Islamic practices is pointless. The reason is that religious experience exists only in terms of the subject's spiritual and mental state. In fact, the experiencing subject is the one who rekindles the smouldering embers of any religious ritual, including the driest and most monotonous.

If the legal domain of Islam is structured on some sort of consensus about the sources of law, then we might think otherwise as far as faith is concerned. *Imān* is the headway into a religious experience. No one is believed to have faith only by the outward adherence to a religion. However, the doctrinal systematisation of

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 304.

⁴⁶ Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, xiv.

theology has engulfed faith as well, leaving no much space for subjectivity and intimacy. For modern intellectuals, it is reasonable to talk about the five pillars of Islam, as manifestations of a nominal religious identity, but they might be astounded when Muslims speak systematically of the six articles of faith and their formal definitions. The structuring of faith seems to run counter to the very core of heartfelt communion with the divine. Undeniably, faith is private, subjective, personal, and intimate, while submission to religious legal injunctions is communal, objective, social, and outward.

Taken from these apparently postmodern lenses, religious experience as a manifestation of the enduring human hope to rise above one's reality and taste the sacred has been viewed with askance from the mainstream religious authorities. Doctrinal concerns are usually absorbed by a desire to establish conformity and decide on the soundness of faith claims. Here, religion echoes the same philosophical discussions found elsewhere about how to know and to what extent do we really know when we claim to know. Whether religious experience is possible in Islam or not, remains an essential question. Without qualm, one can say that the very concept of religion requires by necessity an experience of sorts. Indeed, some religions are more open to spiritual experiences than others, but a minimum amount of an occult experience is inevitable. Moreover, taking religious experience to exclusively refer to those dramatic, mystical, numinous, and transcendent states of mind will do disservice to the daily, ordinary, simple, and common religious experiences of people whose religious devotion incites them to lead virtuous lives according to certain religious precepts. With the passage of time, a large portion of any religion becomes an inherent culture. At the surface, not all cultural ideals are traced back to religion, but the main traits of a culture are always informed by deeply rooted religious worldviews. What is implicit in a culture constitutes the worldview or the vision of its underlying religion. Ordinary religious experiences are usually nurtured by the vision of a religion in an implicit way.⁴⁷ Therefore, the immediacy of religious experience and its dependence on unmediated acquaintance, as Schleiermacher envisioned, does not preclude the latent existence of

⁴⁷ Esmail, *The Poetics of Religious Experience*, 1.

a set of beliefs and particular concepts because the moments of experience are reliant on them.⁴⁸

The Possibility of Religious Experience in Islamic Theology

Unlike Christianity, Islamic theology emerged with the aim to defend rationally the doctrines of Islam against external intellectual assaults. Hence, spirituality in its individualist form is to be found outside theology. In the case of modern Christian understanding of religious experience within a given theology, we find that the history of doctrinal changes is perceived to reflect the changing nature of human spirituality. To use Birney Smith's words, "theology is, therefore, compelled by biblical criticism to take account of the inner life of men as a primary factor in the construction of doctrine."⁴⁹ In Islam, we might comfortably speak of theology and religious experience as two separate entities. Such an understanding suggests that Islamic theology has been so rigid that spirituality flourished outside its realm. Seyyed Hossein Nasr maintains that theology and spirituality in Christianity are intertwined⁵⁰ and that "such has never been the case in Islam,"⁵¹ Nasr argues that Islamic theology known as *Kalām* remained a science with mainly one purpose, that of intellectually defending religion against alien attacks.⁵² He categorically concludes that "the deepest spiritual and intellectual expressions of Islam are not to be found in works of *Kalām*."⁵³ We will see, later, that Nasr brings in a more flexible view as to the relationship between *Kalām*, in its Ash'arite form, and Sufism, and I will demonstrate that the estrangement between spirituality and *Kalām* has not been the only reality in the history of Islam. My contention finds ample evidence in the mainstream Islamic school of theology known as Ash'arism.

⁴⁸ Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, xv.

⁴⁹ Birney G. Smith, "Theology and Religious Experience." *The Biblical World* 40, no. 2 (1912): 97–108.

⁵⁰ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), 120.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

The systematisation of theological precepts into organised doctrines threatens the essence of any religious experience, which, by definition, tries to escape the limitations of conformity. This is the reason why spirituality and religious experience are generally overlooked by Islamic theologians allowing mysticism or Sufism to grow along a different course. However, religious experience requires the existence of some speculative and theological ideas. No religious experience would be possible if it starts from nothing. At least some personal and vague ideas about the divine are necessary. That is to say that religious experience is “mediated by concepts and beliefs and known only in hindsight through the help of various guides, such as creeds, beliefs, and speculations.”⁵⁴ In other words, the experiential approach to religion, at least in Schleiermacher’s view, presupposes the presence of some conceptions about God before any kind of religious experience transpires.⁵⁵ Although Islamic theology is generally speculative, I will show that some Islamic theological concepts could help nurture a vivid and warm religious experience owing to the fact that, Islamic theology does not speak about the nature of God only but accounts also for His interaction with human existence.⁵⁶ While theology informs the religious experience of individual Muslims, Sufism addresses questions of a specifically theological character.⁵⁷

Islamic theology or *Kalām* is the product of a speculative activity that resulted from Muslims’ disagreements over issues of political leadership (*imāmah*) and human free will.⁵⁸ Mu’tazilah was the first Islamic group to use systematic logical reasoning in the construction of religious claims. Rationalism was the true reflection of Mu’tazilah’s obsession with logic.

The founder of Sunni Ash‘arism, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (873–935), had been a fervent proponent of Mu’tazilite theology before he left its camp. After a long period as a pupil of the

⁵⁴ Paul Weiss, “Religious Experience,” *The Review of Metaphysics*, 6.

⁵⁵ Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 14.

⁵⁶ Paul L. Heck, Paul, Review of *Sufism and Theology* by Ayman Shihadeh (ed.), *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 10, no. 1 (2008): 129.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Alexander Treiger, “Origins of *Kalām*,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 27–43.

Mu'tazilite master al-Jubba'i (d. 915) and exactly at the age of forty, he declared his recantation and disapproval of Mu'tazilite doctrines. Theologically, al-Ash'ari's attempt to follow a more literalist interpretation of the Quran proved inadequate in areas where there are conflicting texts about central issues of creed. Thus, later Ash'arites had to reconcile these texts availing themselves of Mu'tazilite rational tools.

The Mu'tazilah argued that God is both omnipotent and just. Therefore, God's actions are preconditioned by principles known to human reason. Thus, it is unthinkable that God would do wrong or inflict injustice. Various verses in the Quran lend support to this position. However, other verses stress, to the contrary, the absolute freedom of God to act as He wishes even against the human conception of justice. According to this view, God can do wrong if he wishes. The Ash'arites turned the dire rationalism of the Mu'tazilah on its head. By affirming the absolute omnipotence of God, they opened the gate for a new logic embedded in both revelation and reason. If God's actions did not follow the static logic of obligation or necessity, then the whole universe would be replete with surprises and contradictions solved only by recourse to divine words, the Scripture. According to the Mu'tazilah, the human mind is divinely equipped with mental abilities that enable it to expect and envisage fate. States of thrill, astonishment, grace, ecstasy, and awe are essential in building any enthusiastic spirituality, and find little room in this rigid rationalistic outlook. The Ash'arites, on the contrary, argue that if we knew a priori what will happen to us at the hands of God, then how are we to appreciate his grace? Therefore, God in Sunni Ash'arism is utterly beyond human ken and could be grasped only through his words and the believer's deeply rooted faith in the Book. That said, both theologies agree on God's goodness but diverge in the way He actually acts. A consistent behaviour, although it generates security and comfort, breeds rigidity and monotony. A precarious God, although unsettling, enlivens human spiritual yearning for divine grace. Let us consider a verse on God's omnipotence that reads, "Effector of what He intends,"⁵⁹ and envisage our response to it based on the rationalism of Mu'tazilah

⁵⁹ *The Quran*, 85: 16.

and the occasionalism of the Ash‘arites. Undoubtedly, the former would want us to believe that what God wills must accord with his attribute of justice, which in turn attunes to the constraints of human logic. Consequently, what God will do is finite by virtue of our limited human reason. The latter would take us into shoreless horizons of God’s absolute will. Here God is free, and His will is boundless. This view will definitely take us on a spiritual journey with no stops, limits, or borders. The only agent of human salvation is God’s unpredicted grace and the only way to salvation is faith and trust in the Lord. The spiritual significance of Ash‘arite theology lies perfectly not only in its insistence on divine omnipotence and its limitless horizons, but also in the idea of bringing the reality of God into the everyday world by making reason subservient to His will.⁶⁰

When the intellect operates independently from the will, it tends to neglect the inner parts of human existence by giving itself totally to logically structured categories, which, despite their internal consistency, may not point to any existing reality. Hence, Ash‘arite theologians, by stressing the importance of God’s absolute will, have distanced themselves significantly from radical rationality and espoused a practical rationality informed not by mental categories but rather by the actual manifestations of the divine will in a discontinuous, atomistic, and bewildering reality. For this reason, Nasr had to play down the presumed absence of spirituality within Islamic *Kalām* and concede to the fact that “despite its “anti-intellectualism”, Ash‘arism not only became the prevalent *Kalām* in the Sunni world but also became combined in certain circumstances with Sufism.”⁶¹

Our quest for a link between Ash‘arism and a supposed form of spirituality is hermeneutical in nature. Some might even extract spirituality even from the stiffest doctrines such as the legalism of traditionists or the literalism of the *Zāhirīs*.⁶² This is because almost

⁶⁰ Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin to the Present*, 129.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁶² A classical Islamic school of law. It emerged in the ninth century in Baghdad and flourished later in Andalusia. As its name suggests, the proponents of this school are inclined towards a rigid and literalist understanding of religious texts especially their rejection of analogy and causation in matters of legal interpretation. See Ignác Goldziher, *The Zāhirīs: Their Doctrine and their History: A Contribution to the*

all Islamic schools of thought possess some kind of spiritual appeal. However, spirituality in its subjective nature is found manifestly in the effort of some exceptional scholars who could blend theology, law, and spirituality in the same pot and produce the most succulent juice thereof. I refer here to an Ash'arite leader and mystic: al-Ghazālī. He could "bring about an intellectual synthesis of these mutually repellent trends."⁶³ Obviously, although al-Ghazālī's journey from scholastic speculative theology to practical mysticism has marked the end of a phase and the beginning of another in the history of Islamic knowledge, it did by no means erect impenetrable walls between two disciplines or more exactly two orientations, for he did not, Watt argues, cease to be a theologian when he became a mystic.⁶⁴ Indeed, he believed in Sufism and individual spirituality as the way to an esoteric religious truth attained through experience rather than intellectual speculation.

My focus is on two treatises of al-Ghazālī, one extracted from his magnum opus *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* or *The Revival of the Sciences of Religion* and entitled *Kitāb Qawā'id al-'Aqā'id* or *The Book on the Foundation of the Articles of Faith*⁶⁵; and his famous autobiography⁶⁶ in which he gives an account of his spiritual journey from an obdurate attachment to speculative theology and law to Sufism. I have selected these two works because they respectively represent theological systemisation of doctrines and practical spirituality.

He begins his book on faith with an elaboration on God's transcendence stressing God's nearness to man and at the same time His exalted 'aboveness' with no compeer nor like. From this perspective, al-Ghazālī establishes an orthodoxy of the middle between the Mu'tazilah who over-emphasised transcendence and the

History of Islamic Theology, trans. and ed. Wolfgang Behn. (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 41.

⁶³ Abdur-Rahman Ibrahim Doi, "Sunnism" in *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*, (ed.), Seyyed Hossein Nasr (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2008), 303.

⁶⁴ Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa Bidāyat al-Hidāya* [*Deliverance from Error and the Beginning of Guidance*], trans. W. Montgomery Watt (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2005), xii–xiii.

⁶⁵ Al-Ghazali, *The Foundations of the Articles of Faith* (*Kitāb Qawā'id al-'Aqā'id*), translated with notes by Nabih Amin Faris (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1999).

⁶⁶ Al-Ghazali, *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl*.

anthropomorphists who stressed God's likeness of form with humans.⁶⁷ This ecumenical position should not be understood as looking for a middle between two extreme points. Al-Ghazālī's view of God is holistic, indivisible, and spiritual in essence. While he maintains that God is not a substance to be located in space or time, he does not preclude the idea of God sitting on the throne. For him, God is not supported by the throne nor is He dependent on it.⁶⁸ Divine transcendence does not entail God's farness from his creatures. Within a religious system where God is distant, transcendent, and thought of as a remote existence, we do not expect much of a religious experience embedded in intimacy and subjectivity. The spiritual crisis of al-Ghazālī speaks volumes of this fact. A renowned theologian and erudite jurist, al-Ghazālī could not escape the pressing demands of his empty soul. Speculative theology and well-ordered systems of law cannot fill the spiritual vacuum in the hearts of those who crave God's encounter, those who desire not just to speculate about Him but to commune with Him. However, his Ash'arite conception of an omnipotent and precarious God, would eventually inform and nurture his religious experience with a deep spiritual dimension. Thus, his religious experience not only changed the course of his life, but also marked a turning point in the history of Islamic thought. "He wrote systematic works in which, abandoning the beaten paths of the complacent theologians, he presented in clearly articulated form the method he considered requisite for the reconstruction of the religious sciences of Islam; he wrote shorter treatises in which he gave powerful expression to particular points in his religious thinking. These were products of his turning away from trends whose dangers to the religious goals of study and of life he had recognised."⁶⁹

For al-Ghazālī, God's knowledge has no bounds. He has the knowledge of even the suggestions of the mind and the movements

⁶⁷ Al-Ghazali, *Kitāb Qawā'id al-'Aqā'id*, 2–3.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁹ Ignác Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, trans. Andras and Ruth Hamori, ed. Charles Issawi and Bernard Lewis (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), 157.

of the thought.⁷⁰ His will encompasses everything, including good and evil.⁷¹ Obedience and disobedience are both the outcome of His will.⁷² Here we realise that al-Ghazālī reproduces the Ash‘arite position about God’s absolute omnipotence that acts according to His own conception of justice, a justice distinct from that conceived of by human reason.⁷³ The concept of divine justice within al-Ghazālī’s theology is based on a twofold epistemology: One spiritual and the other theological. According to him, knowledge and spirituality are inseparable. To illustrate that, al-Ghazālī considers certainty to be the fruit of God’s intimate presence in the heart of the knower. Sense-based as well as reason-based knowledge are not immune from the perils of scepticism, which render the formulation of proofs a futile endeavour. For this reason, if one desires to construct knowledge with certainty, he is required to open his heart and mind to spiritual illumination coming from above. Al-Ghazālī tells us that he was cured from the malice of scepticism not by any mode of demonstrative proofs but, rather, by God’s grace,

[...] I was a skeptic in fact, but not in utterance and doctrine. At length God Most High cured me of that sickness. My soul regained its health and equilibrium and once again I accepted the self-evident data of reason and relied on them with safety and certainty. But that was not achieved by constructing a proof or putting together an argument. On the contrary, it was the effect of a light, which God Most High cast into my breast. And that light is the key to most knowledge. Therefore, whoever thinks that the unveiling of truth depends on precisely formulated proofs has indeed straitened the broad mercy of God.⁷⁴

Here, we can easily detect the provenance of al-Ghazālī’s understanding, which places the senses and intellect below a more

⁷⁰ Al-Ghazali, *Kitāb Qawā'id al-'Aqā'id*, 4.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 5.

⁷³ Ibid., 6.

⁷⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl*, 4–5.

reliable source of knowledge, i.e., the spiritual connection with the divine. His Ash'arite views are, beyond doubt, behind his readiness to subordinate reason to revelation, an idea unanimously held by early Ash'arite theologians.⁷⁵ Religious experience in al-Ghazālī's perspective is the outcome of the believer's response to God as an ultimate reality. Since this response is rooted in human consciousness, that is, the fact of being mindful of what God means and how He acts, religious experience is, then, the manifestation of a given set of beliefs on which a given experience transpires. This explains why spirituality is more emphasised in non-theistic religions such as Jainism, Buddhism, and many other oriental faiths than in theistic religions like Judaism or Islam. Similarly, this explains why, within Islam, Ash'arism is more open to Sufism than Wahhabism or Mu'tazilism.⁷⁶ The logic of religious experience in Islam represents the middle point between theology and Sufism. While the former provides the systemic justification for doctrinal precepts, the latter extends that justification beyond the limits of logical validity in its logical sense. In theology, God is conceptualised as a remote entity from the human reality with distinct attributes and unique essence; but, in Sufism, this remoteness, although acknowledged doctrinally, is twisted to imply exactly its opposite at the level of experiencing the Divine. Thus, "the infinite distance of the divine from the human goes hand in hand with its infinite proximity to the human. Like the horizon, it is ever so near and ever so far."⁷⁷ For al-Ghazālī, religion

⁷⁵ Although al-Ghazālī distanced himself from the *mutakallimūn* (speculative theologians) due to their excessive immersion in metaphysical sophistry and estrangement from the heart of a religious experience unmediated by rational argumentation, he remained faithful to the Ash'arite foundational principles. This is demonstrated not only by his theological and polemical books, but also by works written for spiritual nourishment like *Ihyā'*. For more details on al-Ghazālī's Ash'arite predilections, see Michael Marmura, "Ghazali and Asha'arism Revisited," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (2002): 91–110.

⁷⁶ Despite their rationalist tendencies, the Mu'tazilah were known for their ascetic and spiritual devotions. See Osman Aydinli, (2007) "Ascetic And Devotional Elements in the Mu'tazilite Tradition: The Sufi Mu'tazilites," *The Muslim World* 97, no. 2 (2007): 174–89. This corroborates the main argument laid down in the present paper to the effect that religious experience is possible even within the most rigid forms of theology as long as the divine is invoked.

⁷⁷ Esmail, *The Poetics of Religious Experience*, 4.

is both a given and an event. What is given is usually static, unchangeable and not contingent. It is the amalgamation of doctrines, ethical principles, and laws that the codification of which provides religion with its identity to set it apart from other religions. On the contrary, an event refers to what occurs perpetually in time and space with a force capable of transforming and altering. Religion as an event is an ever-changing process of experience, transformation, and transcendence. Al-Ghazālī understands this dichotomy in terms of a down-up movement or *ḥaḍīd* (Lit., bottom) and *yafāʿ* (lit., loftiness) which he views as a course to be traversed upwards in order to get in touch with the heart of religion.⁷⁸ According to him, theology being a speculative toil aiming at defending orthodoxy against the assaults of heretics leaves much to be desired for someone like him who strives to reach the heights of universal truths.

What sets al-Ghazālī's account apart from other treatises authored by later Ash'arites is his dislike of argumentative presentation of the foundations of faith, for "what argumentation impairs is greater than what it repairs, and what it corrupts is greater than what it sets aright."⁷⁹ As God creates good and evil, humans find repose not in some legally or theologically formulated dicta but in the boundless divine grace and mercy. Indeed, God's grace can be grasped using doctrinal statements or even hypothetical propositions. For al-Ghazālī, all the strategies of knowing the divine are futile and lead to an epistemic impasse unless they start from a somewhat unusual way of knowing, that is the spiritual. Thus, knowledge is infused directly from above. It originates from the heart then it moves to the intellect. Hence, the truth-value of any proposition about the divine depends first on its spiritual charge, uplifting power, and the extent to which it brings the human from afar to unite with the divine. According to al-Ghazālī, all intellectual disciplines, including logic, physics, theology, ethics, and others, fall short of securing certainty in God's existence and attributes. Only the method of immediate experience practiced by the mystics can remedy our epistemology about divine truths.⁸⁰ Experiencing the unknown is a practical

⁷⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl*, 3.

⁷⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Kitāb Qawā'id al-'Aqā'id*, 14.

⁸⁰ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl*, 47.

exercise and a journey. Just like physics wherein experiments correct assumed rational inferences,⁸¹ mysticism sets aright how doctrines are understood and theorised. Therefore, stripping one's heart from all worldly appetites opens the intellect to accept new truths that could have never been accommodated had reason been the only tool accessible for knowledge. Al-Ghazālī avers, "Most of the philosophers' proofs in natural sciences and theology are constructed in this fashion. They conceive of things according to the measure of their observations and reasoning. What they are unfamiliar with, they suppose impossible."⁸²

At least for al-Ghazālī, the chasm dividing the realms of theology and spirituality is bridged. One of his greatest achievements, Watt states, is that

[H]e brought orthodoxy and mysticism into closer contact; the orthodox theologians still went their own way, and so did the mystics, but the theologians became more ready to accept the mystics as respectable, while the mystics were more careful to remain within the bounds of orthodoxy.⁸³

Conclusion

Within this ecumenical perspective, theology is no longer an artificial set of dogmatic beliefs to memorise nor rationally constructed claims to be demonstrated. Rather, it is an itinerary traversed by the wayfarers who yearn to commune with the divine. It is a spiritual call beckoning towards this unfathomable intimacy with God and internalising the wisdom underlying the outward façade of Islam. Thus, al-Ghazālī's theology is a transformative theology through its spiritual élan. The Islamic dialectic theology (*Kalām*) has always been about defence, apologetics, and polemics. However, with al-Ghazālī, a new path is proposed, a path of a spiritual theology in which the intellect and the soul unite in their journey to reach the ultimate destination, God.

⁸¹ Ibid., 76.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., xiii–xiv.

TRANSLITERATION TABLE

CONSONANTS

Ar=Arabic, Pr=Persian, OT=Ottoman Turkish, Ur=Urdu

Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR
ء	‘	‘	‘	ز	z	z	z	گ	—	g	g
ب	b	b	b	ژ	—	—	ř	ل	l	l	l
پ	—	p	p	ژ	—	zh	j	م	m	m	m
ت	t	t	t	س	s	s	s	ن	n	n	n
ٹ	—	—	ṭ	ش	sh	sh	ş	ه	h	h	h ¹
ث	th	th	th	ص	ṣ	ṣ	ş	و	w	v/u	v
ج	j	j	c	ض	ḍ	ḍ	ž	ی	y	y	y
چ	—	ch	çh	ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	ة	-ah	—	-a ²
ح	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	ظ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	ال	al ³	—	—
خ	kh	kh	kh	ع	‘	‘	‘	¹ – when not final ² – at in construct state ³ – (article) al - or l-			
د	d	d	d	غ	gh	gh	ğ				
ڈ	—	—	ḍ	ف	f	f	f				
ذ	dh	dh	dh	ق	q	q	k				
ر	r	r	r	ك	k	k/g	k/ñ	k			

VOWELS

	Arabic and Persian	Urdu	Ottoman Turkish
Long	ا	ā	ā
	آ	Ā	—
	و	ū	ū
	ي	ī	ī
Doubled	ي	iy (final form ī)	iy (final form ī)
	و	uww (final form ū)	uvv
		uvv (for Persian)	uvv
Diphthongs	و	au	ev
	ی	ay	ey
Short	ا	a	a or e
	u	u	u or ū
	ی	i	o or ö
	ی	i	ī

URDU ASPIRATED SOUNDS

For aspirated sounds not used in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish add h after the letter and underline both the letters e.g. چ jh گ gh

For Ottoman Turkish, modern Turkish orthography may be used.

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