



Short Collection: On Major Works of Islamic Civilization

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Spiritual Elitism

Al Ba'unīyah's understanding of repentance, sincerity, remembrance, and love in *Principles of Sufism* proves the spiritual elitism she ascribes to the Sufi path. This is important because she distinguishes between Sufis, whom she considers a spiritual elite, and non-Sufis, commoners, in her work to ascribe to the Sufis elevated ideas the commoners do not possess or cannot possess. This is evident as each of the four principles of Sufism is analyzed.

While for the commoner, repentance means renouncing sins and obeying God, for her spiritual elite, it means renouncing obedience for an exclusive concern with God. In her own words, "inner repentance, with which the Sufi folk are concerned, is to turn away from all things and toward God, might and glorious."¹ In other words, for the commoners, if repentance is to be valid, it must contain remorse from sin, abstention from it, and the resolution not to return to it. If it does not contain those, the repentance is not valid. In contrast to this formulaic argument that the commoners must follow, while a Sufi "will enter the Sufi's mystical stages only through the door of repentance, and he will attain his goal only by holding fast to repentance,"² the Sufi must ultimately cross through the door of commoner's repentance toward disregarding repentance itself as the Sufi must exclusively focus one's attention on God.³ They repent "for looking at anything but God, for attachment to anything other than God, for reliance on anything but God, and for being occupied with anything other than God."⁴ In other words, the author ascribes to the Sufis an elevated understanding of repentance which makes the Sufis a spiritual elite in contrast to the understanding of the commoners.

¹ I.2.5-6

² I.35.3-5

³ I.II.3-5

⁴ I.20.1-3

While for the commoner, sincerity means outward compliance without a proper intention or, perhaps, with the wrong intention to pretend that one is sincere, for her spiritual elite, it means matching outward actions with the elevated inner thoughts with which Sufis regard sincerity. In her own words, “praise Him who singled out for sincerity a distinguished group who made it their habit to conceal their mystical states and good deeds.”⁵ In other words, the spiritual elite must hide its own exemplary deeds and not show them off if they become visible to others. This contrasts with the commoners who either pretend they are sincere or, perhaps, are sincere without knowing how to utilize sincerity. In fact, the author claims that her spiritual elite possesses even the power to expose the commoners’ insincerities before others realize them: “God exposes [them] in this world by means of the spiritual insight of the Sufi masters, even before He exposes [them] in the Hereafter in public for all to witness.”⁶ In other words, the author ascribes to the Sufis an elevated understanding of sincerity which makes the Sufis a spiritual elite in contrast to the understanding of the commoners.

While for the commoner, remembrance means just a blind action without any inner meaning, for her spiritual elite, remembrance means an inwardly meaningful remembrance of God and the annihilation of self-consciousness and utter absorption in God. In her own words, “[the Sufis’] remembrance will be by Him and to Him, such that you will disappear from the remembrance into the One recalled, then from the One recalled, into the disappearance of obliteration and annihilation.”⁷ In other words, God will enable the Sufi to remember Him through conscious and sincere action by granting His power to the Sufi to remember Him so. This is in contrast to the commoners’ understanding of remembrance, by

⁵ 2.32.1-2

⁶ 2.26.2-4

⁷ 3.50.7-9

which the commoner only blindly remembers God as if it were one more habit to follow. In other words, the author ascribes to the Sufis an elevated understanding of remembrance of God, which makes the Sufis a spiritual elite in contrast to the understanding of the commoners.

While for the commoners, love means either only profane love or love that can be potentially transferred to the Divine, for her spiritual elite, it means the practical realization of that transference of love from the profane realm to the Divine. In her own words, “the subtle meaning of God’s love for the worshipper is the selection of the worshipper for this secret... by seizing him with the Beloved’s attractions and effacing annihilations until the worshipper is without a sense of self in the light of the sun of true oneness.”⁸ In other words, for her spiritual elite, God provides the understanding by which the Sufi, unlike the commoner, can realize such love. The love of the Sufi for the Beloved happens to be a fantastic realization of God’s love and, most importantly, of the power of that love to delight the Sufi and annihilate in the Sufi whatever obstructs such love from forming. This contrasts with the commoners who are either entangled only by profane love or initial understandings of how to transfer that love. In other words, the author ascribes to the Sufis an elevated understanding of the love of God, which makes the Sufis a spiritual elite in contrast to the understanding of the commoners.

In sum, al-Ba’uniyyah understands repentance, sincerity, remembrance, and love as indicative of the superiority of the Sufis’ understanding of these principles in contrast to the commoners. Further research could elucidate better how the distinction between the commoners and her spiritual elite seem to follow from adherence to rules and regulations in the former and ecstatic love that disregard such rules in the latter. As the author herself

⁸ 5.16.1-5

claims, quoting Dhū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī, but ascribing God's words to the Sufis, "I am the ruler of their affairs, the governor of their hearts, and the power over their mystical states. I do not allow their hearts to repose in anything but remembrance of Me, for they are intimate with Me alone. They bring their hearts before Me, alone, and their abode is made only in My shelter."⁹

⁹ 1.26.17-21

Love Mysticism & Mystical Poetry in Hafiz

In the anthology of poems by Hafiz, titled *Faces of Love*, some poems seem to support only a profane interpretation. However, it has been noted that “Islamic mystical poetry almost always uses the language and symbolism of profane love for divine love.”¹⁰ Therefore, what has struck me the most about his anthology is *how* Hafiz makes the poems lend themselves to support a divine and profane love interpretation. This is important because once the poem can be interpreted as providing either a divine or a profane or both divine and profane interpretations, this lends credence to a further interpretation that the ambiguity in the poems results from the ambiguity in Hafiz himself – as a man who rejects both extremes of prudishness and respectability. In a sense, the profane is only profane to the extent that one has not yet made it sacred for Hafiz. Thus, he presents the poems as enabling one how to make sense of that. Such ambiguity of interpretation is evident in the brief discussions of poem lines that follow from two of his poems.

The first one is the poem that starts with “My love for pretty faces...” Hafiz’s lines read, “I am a man from heaven, But on this path I see, My love of youth and beauty, Have made a slave of me.” In other words, although Hafiz identifies himself as one who searches for divine love, “a man from heaven,” his senses have so taken hostage of him that he pursues a profane physical gratification that has both factually and seemingly unknowingly to him enslaved him. One could argue that his case is one of passionate love that does not necessarily lead to sexual intercourse. This would support a divine love interpretation. However, his overall profane helplessness before wine and its resulting intoxication require serious explanation by one who wishes to defend Hafiz as professing divine love only. Because the poem can lend

¹⁰ El-Rouayheb’s comment.

itself to both profane and divine love interpretations, the ambiguity of the lines is indicative of the ambiguity lying in the man himself and of how he must have lived his life.

The second poem is the one that starts with “If that Shirazi Turk would take...” Hafiz’s lines read, “You slandered me, and you spoke well – May God forgive what you said! A bitter answer suits such lips, So sugar-sweet and ruby-red.” In other words, Hafiz, who pictures himself as a wine-loving and seemingly-God-intoxicated man, ambiguously reprimands his lover while using God’s name against his lover’s slandering as if Hafiz’s own conduct were free of fault! Furthermore, the lines of the poem attest to the ambiguity in Hafiz as he not only professes a profane love for the young Turk but also indicates the divine love he sees within that profane love as he calls out to his ultimate Beloved, God, upon feeling the pains that his profane love has caused him. Indeed, the sugar-sweet and ruby-red metaphors provide further evidence for such ambiguity as Hafiz suffers from his love for this “ruby-red” young Turk while finding solace in God's “sugar-sweet” love that ultimately neither betrays nor fails him. After all, Hafiz portrays himself against the extremes of respectability and prudishness - as a “man from heaven” though still entangled in the webs of mundane love.

Therefore, the anthology of Hafiz’s poems attests that the ambiguity of the poem’s lines results from the realizations of the ambiguity lying within the man himself. As it has been noted, perhaps this was part of his appeal. Readers could find hidden reflections of themselves and their desires in the poetry of Hafiz.

Hayy Ibn Yaqzan

In *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, Ibn Tufayl claims he provides Avicenna's dimension of mystical thought. This assertion elucidates the distinction between Ghazali's mysticism and Avicenna's more generally philosophical inclination. That Ibn Tufayl introduces the philosophical Avicenna's more mystical dimension in his tale allows him to present Hayy's journey as one whose mystical insight is the culmination of carefully reasoned thinking. These topics will be evident as I provide a summary of the story and conclude with my thoughts on the main ideas behind the story.

It revolves around Hayy. His birth may have occurred without parents or, as an abandoned child, a doe has raised him. Without any humans like him around and living among does, he grows very fond of the female doe that takes care of him as the giver of his life. He mimics and lives among other animals too. As he grows up, Hayy starts observing nature more intently as nature becomes a teacher that guides his inherent power of reasoning. It further helps him realize how different he is from the other animals and makes him wonder about his source. Several incidents display such a conclusion, such as his realization that, as the other animals' private parts are better concealed than him, it aggravates him dearly. Although Hayy still clings to the doe as the giver of his life, he continuously starts taking care of his different body and becoming aware of its difference and limitations.

Once, he finds a dead animal's body and wonders what caused it to become motionless. He discovers an empty cavity on the left side of the dead animal's body, around where its heart would be, and concludes that something that gave it life has left it. He apprehends the nature of that "something" as being vaporous, and as a fire later takes place among a bed of reeds, he concludes that fire shares its essence with the vapor of that

“something.” Precisely, as he throws things inside a fire and observes that fire evaporates them, Hayy grasps that the vaporous fire that had left the dead animal's body is what made it lifeless. This grasping further intrigues Hayy and leads him to study the nature of bodies and the fire within.

As Hayy matures in his use of naturalistic reason, he watches as everything he sees around him goes through birth, death, old age, and disease stages. Because the lack of the fiery spirit within causes a body to become dead, Hayy concludes the spirit to be of a different nature and maybe even have a different source than what simply gives birth to the body. He further wonders whether birth, death, old age, and disease similarly affect the stars above him and, by reason, concludes they must be finite since they are also bodies made of matter – though more extensive than his but still unlike the spirit.

Eventually, Hayy reasons that the spirit, being of a different nature than that which is finite, must have a non-finite cause. Searching for the ineffable cause of this infinite spirit, he realizes it must be an Uncaused Cause whose emanation of all things is very much a part of its Being. By adopting lengthy practices of asceticism, Hayy ultimately enters into a state of meditation, trance, and union with such Uncaused Cause and finds shelter within. The story ends as Hayy comes into contact with other humans who belong to a revealed religion. At first, Hayy philosophically wonders at senseless acts of external rituals and the lack of internal reasoned searching. In the end, he mystically realizes that the Uncaused Cause provides different paths for different types of human beings. His philosophical journey, whose mystical insight is its very culmination, may be too radical for other human beings.

In my view, the tale of Hayy Ibn Yaqzan unfolds like that of a primal budding philosopher's understanding of his body as limited in both its gross and subtle features. By

subtly employing his mind and intelligence faculties, Hayy understands how flesh and bones are all which grossly make up his body. As Hayy's realization eventually leads him to uncover the spirit, which is infinite in him, Ibn Tufayl uncovers to the reader the surprisingly un-Abrahamic but instead Neoplatonic-Aristotelian account he prefers as a realization of the self. Through Hayy's philosophical journey, Ibn Tufayl pools ideas of contemporary philosophy of mind (mind/body dualism), ethics (vegetarianism/meat-eating), metaphysics (who am I, what am I doing here, and what is going to happen to me after death), and others into a narrative that urges us, his readers, to make sense of how we can employ his take to better account for our own realizations of self.

In sum, the tale of Hayy reveals Ibn Tufayl's attempt to uncover that the practices of revealed religion are but contingent and not necessary ones to one whose journey follows that of Hayy's. This is not to discredit revealed religion altogether since Hayy sees a place for it in human society. However, the tale may function as a handbook for those philosophically inclined, as Ibn Tufayl shows Hayy to be. Further research may inquire into how, if one regarded the Qur'an as an aesthetic manifestation of Hayy's philosophical truth, its aesthetics could relate to the universal/particular ideal present in Hayy's philosophical journey. In relation, it could be argued that the aesthetics of the Qur'an may touch on the particularity of each one of us so that our various particularities may, in turn, tap onto and be enlightened by the universal ideal proposed in Hayy's philosophical journey. After all, as Ibn Tufayl aptly writes, he has not "left the secrets set down" in his tale "entirely without a veil – a sheer one, easily pierced by those fit to do so."¹¹

¹¹ Ibn Tufayl, 166

Creeds

Some striking observations from the various creeds in Watt's *Islamic Creeds: A Selection* spring from the failure to establish clear reasoning to explain the utterances of the Qur'an as the speech of God. Though it may be that such a precise definition is not necessary, this failure critically complicates the reading of several of the creeds that talk about the reception of the words of the Qur'an. This bewilderment is evident as Ibn Hanbal's creed claims that there is no interpreter between God and a human being, and Al-Ash'arī's creed paradoxically claims that the Qur'an, as the speech of God, is neither created nor uncreated.

Ibn Hanbal's first creed asserts that God may contact a human being through speech that does not need an intermediary. In Ibn Hanbal's own words, "God speaks to human beings, and there is no interpreter between Him and them."¹² This stance is problematic because it may lead one to think there is a contradiction between Muhammad's receiving the speech of God in his heart,¹³ which enables the Prophet to reveal the speech of God to others, and Muhammad's revelation of it as a messenger and interpreter. Since, for Ibn Hanbal, the speech of God is uncreated,¹⁴ how are we to understand Muhammad as the revealer, messenger, and interpreter of the speech of God?

At first, I thought the solution to this paradox may fall with Al-Ash'arī's creed for, unlike Ibn Hanbal, Al-Ash'arī leaves open, though still paradoxically unexplained, the question of Muhammad's utterance of the Qur'an. In Al-Ash'arī's words, the "utterance of the Qur'an is not said to be created, nor is it said to be uncreated."¹⁵ In other words, Al-Ash'arī may mean that Muhammad's utterance of the Qur'an is neither created nor uncreated but

¹² Watt, 31

¹³ —, 32

¹⁴ —, 37-38

¹⁵ —, 43

instead partakes of the nature of the Qur'ān. If its sounds are uncreated, Muhammad cannot be taken as somehow creating them when he reveals it to the people.

However, this stance is still unsatisfying because the ambiguousness remains in several other creeds following that of Al-Ash'arī. For example, Al-Tahāwī mentions that the speech of God “proceeded from Him amodally.”¹⁶ Abū Hanīfa claims that the speech of God “is written [in paper], recited by the tongues, remembered in the breasts, but not inhering in them.”¹⁷ Al-Ghazālī reasons that the speech of God “does not suffer division and separation by being transferred to the hearts and pages.”¹⁸ Finally, Al-Ījī leaves us with another paradox: “what is written is other than the writing, what is recited is other than the reciting, and what is remembered is other than the remembering.”¹⁹ These stances need further clarification if one is to make sense of the several propositions surrounding one's utterance of the speech of God: whether it is created, uncreated, or neither created nor uncreated!

Thus, it seems to me that because the Hanbalis consider reasoning to be unnecessary and dangerous, they then regard the Qur'an as uncreated. In fact, to explain the creation of an uncreated text would undoubtedly be a dangerous task to embark upon if one does not possess, like Hayy in the tale of Ibn Tufayl mentioned above, a natural propensity to think things through reason. It reminds me of Ibn Tufayl's assessment of the pitfalls of revealed religion. Conversely, it seems to me that because the Asharis and Maturidis broadly consider mere accepting and repetition of revealed religion a sin and unbelief since it apparently has no place for the employment of reason, they then think through this issue as the Qur'an being

¹⁶ —, 49

¹⁷ —, 58

¹⁸ —, 76

¹⁹ —, 87

an uncreated speech that does not belong to any human language - though revealed to a prophet in his human language.

It seems to me then that the solution to the puzzle may be in the form of a *modus ponens*. If the Prophet does not interpret the Qur'an, he does not translate it into his language. The Prophet does not interpret the Qur'an, so the Prophet does not translate it into his language. This is a valid argument but whose cogency depends on the proposition that the translation, per se, occurs outside the realm of what reason can infer. Though it does imply, as El-Rouayheb puts it, that the Prophet simply recites what the speech of God reveals to him.

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