Tearing the Veil: Uncovering the Motives of Mystics Misunderstood

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It is tempting to try to apply a reductionist framework to the relation between mystical movements and the institutionalized religions within which they grew. One wants to immediately be able to speak in terms which clearly delineate the orthodox view from the mystical one, and perhaps to set the latter up as the subversive opponent to the former, swooping in to save the purity of a tradition which has presumably been corrupted by the acquisition of political power, the formation of hierarchy, and the formalization of dogma. To do so, however, would be to over-simplify a reality which refuses to fit into any such romantic mold. Looking back on my original aspirations at exploring this topic, I now realize I had succumbed to the popular misconception that Leff refers to as “the deep-seated belief that the Church became corrupt-politically, financially, and in personnel- and the mere vehicle for privilege and private aggrandisement; and consequently that heresy was simply a rebellion against ecclesiastical degeneration or a reaction to ecclesiastical oppression.” Such a view,” he goes on to say, “implicit in many modern diagnoses, does not stand up to examination.”¹ This paper will be explore the tension between mystics and orthodoxy in the Islamic and Christian traditions, if indeed any more accurate picture than the one above can be presented.

Many scholars have expressed concern about the complications of pinpointing the division between mysticism and orthodoxy. As Petry astutely points out, “In the larger sense, the whole arena of theology is mystical, since it emphasizes scriptural initiation and revelation...”² Similarly, Karamustafa identifies the problem of defining the two in opposition to each other, 

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given that ‘orthodox’ members of the elite often became enamored with the practices of mystics “on account of the strong claims of religious authority that they advanced”. ³ Some scholars have advanced even more oxymoronic views, such as Marion, who concludes that “orthodoxy implies a plurality of interpretations, if by orthodoxy we mean to assume that the text of the Bible does, at the end, come from God”.⁴

In the face of such overwhelming ambiguity, there have been some heroic stabs at drawing dividing lines between the orthodox and the mystical, but these generally prove vague and unhelpful. One attempt at delineating the two is to point to the idea of individual experience versus interceded experience. Smith notes that “the mystic...claims that it is possible to have direct intercourse with God, an immediate apprehension of the Divine, when God is no longer regarded as objective to the soul, but becomes a subjective experience.” In contrast, “Religion normally draws a clear distinction between the Divine and the human”.⁵ But this makes an unsatisfactory final statement, given the existence of numerous counterexamples. In Islam especially, mystical religious thought developed so closely alongside what became orthodox religious thought that the two cannot be fully separated from the mutual support they have lent each other, as expressed in Ernst’s observation that “the existence of Sufism and its toleration implied the validity, at least in certain cases, of the religious experience of individuals, and Sunnism was largely based on ordinary men (as distinct from the charismatic leaders of Shi’ism)”.⁶

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Given the lack of decisive criteria to distinguish the heretical from the orthodox, the tendency is to assign the distinction merely on a case by case basis, a practice I will now examine within Christianity and Islam. The dangers of speaking too openly about mystical experiences to an uninitiated general populous seem to have been better understood or heeded by some mystics than others. The pattern that emerges then is that rather than the mystic’s subversive aim to attack orthodoxy, it is more this social awareness or lack thereof that has decided what constitutes a mystical heretic in each tradition. Even if two mystics have the same underlying message, and even if that message is not intended as an attack on institutional religion, ultimately it is the way in which each presents the message, and the political context in which their words enter, that determine their respective institutions’ reception of them.

In mysticism, there is always the idea of the ineffable unitive experience that simply does not translate smoothly to narrative form. This has created room for the orthodoxy to project its own insecurities between the lines of mystical accounts. Three main motifs of mystic thought - the eschewing of earthly concerns, the idea of the ineffable, and the independence offered by the pre-eminence assigned to individual unitive experiences - are easily perceived as threatening to an insecure religious institution. First, it is rather obvious that “...an attitude of mind in which all other relationships are as nothing compared with the relation of the soul to God”\(^7\) obviously threatens to subvert any authority an institution might wish to claim. Even the extreme methods of self-denial preferred by many mystics could be potentially bothersome to the elite: “We hear of an ascetic ...who was summoned before the Caliph...on the charge of not eating meat, of expressing his disapproval of marriage, and of failing to attend the Friday service in the mosque”\(^8\). Though there is evidence that social subversion was not the main aim of mystics, it is

\(^8\) Ibid., 155.
easy to see how such divergence from the norms could be taken that way. Again, the Sufi view that “Love... means to give all that thou hast to Him that thou lovest, so that nothing remains to thee of thine own”, can easily be imagined as a threat to those claiming earthly authority. Turning to a Christian example, in an attempt to clarify thirteenth century mystic Meister Eckhart’s seemingly simple but nuanced view that ‘God is being,’ Tobin explains, “Traditionally, this would mean that God alone can create and sustain the being possessed by a creature. For Eckhart the being that comes from God directly is the divine being itself. This is the being that is united to creatures”. Like many mystics, Eckhart stressed the existence of the divine within each of His creatures, a sentiment that understandably could have shaken the security of any institution based on hierarchy. This is the same concern that plagued Islamic politicians faced with the strengthening Sufi movement in tenth century Baghdad.

Religious scholar Annemarie Schimmel explains that:

“The idea of converting the hearts of all Muslims and teaching them the secret of personal sanctification and not just of blind acceptance would certainly have been dangerous for a society whose religious and political leaders lived in a state of stagnation with neither the strength nor the intention to revitalize the Muslim community”.

The second mystical motif - that of the unspeakable - could also potentially remove institutional power, due to the fact that the doctrinal and the orthodox are by definition rooted in the speakable, spoken, and documented. It has been oft-noted that the topic of mysticism escapes definitions the more we try to impose them on it. Likewise, the topics that mysticism explores,

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9 Ibid., 3.
chiefly the nature of God and of his relation to his creatures, are difficult to definitely articulate. The more sophisticated mystics, among them thirteenth century Christian intellectual Meister Eckhart, have attempted to express this dilemma in their writings, conveying their understanding that “...a belief in the absolute and unconditional impotence of language would reduce one to utter silence.” At the same time, however, there is the paradoxical compulsion to talk about these impossibly complex topics. “Eckhart was certainly not silent about God and man’s relationship to him”. Therefore, it is the mystic’s fate to find oneself forced into a position to be perpetually misinterpreted by those on the outside.

Finally, the independence offered by mysticism sometimes threatened to negate the purpose of the institutions. Schreiner highlights the idea that religious aspirants have always needed some guiding force on their search for the divine, whether through the Church or the Holy Spirit directly. Obviously, the Church would be threatened by the mystical insistence that the latter is all that is needed. A similar sentiment can be found in Islam, in the Sufi ideal of the ultimate value of confidence and faith, which is similar to Protestant injunction that all one needs to be sure of salvation is not to doubt it. Another example of this mystical self-sufficiency that the orthodox religious leaders found so disconcerting comes to us from Eckhart, who “never tires of recalling to the mind of his audiences...the truth that God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. An awareness of this permeates his works”. Thus, leaving aside the degree to which the challenge could be considered intentional, conflict between the mystical and institutional leaders was inevitable on a purely philosophical level.

Though it should now be apparent how mystics managed to offend the orthodoxy, our investigation so far has not allowed us to conclude whether this was the main intention of the mystics or a mere side effect of genuine religious aims. All that can be said at this point is that mystics were more bothersome the more attention they insisted on drawing to those elements of thought which do not lend themselves to literal expression or rigid-minded interpretation - or the more blatantly they engaged in, to borrow a term from Schimmel, “veil-tearing.” By this she refers to those who refer too provocatively to the secrets of the divine, which one has an innate sense should be unstated. As the different treatments of mystics seems to hinge on the skill with which they manage to skirt around the delicate division between the sacred and profane and how provocative their language is that surrounds it, it will now be illuminating to survey the different veil-tearing tactics of a few memorable mystics.

As hinted above, different mystics had different levels of sensitivity to the fact that their subject matter was not easily accessible to their religious peers in general, and that silence was sometimes the only way to do justice to their ineffable ideas or experiences. As indicated by Ernst, there was often a place in orthodox religion for the subtler mystics: “…a degree of acceptance or at least toleration of Sufism among Sunnite scholars provided the individual did not commit himself to assertions which were heretical from the standpoint of dogma…”\textsuperscript{17} The thirteenth century Persian mystical poet, Rumi, exemplifies the potentially successful mystic, in that “Rumi’s teaching, though not always strictly orthodox, generally falls with Islam’s framework”.\textsuperscript{18} Slightly surreptitious, “Rumi does not believe in divulging the Divine mysteries

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\textsuperscript{18} K. Khosla, \textit{The Sufism of Rumi}. (Dorset: Element Books Ltd., 1987), 179.
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to all and sundry”, and this is likely part of what allowed him to avoid the label of heresy and actually become one of the most revered writers in Islam. Although a lesser poet probably could have slipped accidentally into language that would have provoked the orthodox, Rumi managed to avail himself of the full possibilities afforded by the poetic medium to express the ineffable in a way that people did not misinterpret, despite the dangerous areas of symbolism that emerged in Persian Sufi Poetry in the Eleventh Century:

“As with Arabic Sufi poetry, a number of the subjects and themes of mystical poetry were taken over wholesale into Persain from the profane literary tradition. Now these same themes were subject to allegorical interpretation, transformed according to rules outside the text of the verses. Wine was no longer the stuff poured by the caliph’s servants but now became the intoxication of divine love... the key point in this use of non-Islamic symbolism was to suggest the transcendence of conventional norms. Sufi poetry was not about wine drinking, but here it used the shock of reference to wine, and to idolatry, to convey an ultimate goal for which respectability and righteousness were to be sacrifice”.

Perhaps Rumi’s sophisticated distance from his linguistic tool of choice allowed him to avoid tearing the veil in the eyes of his audience. Carl Ernst mentions “…certain remarks that Rumi made in his recorded conversations, indicating that he personally found poetry distasteful; he regarded the composition of poetry as similar to cooking tripe to suit the inclination of a guest”. Perhaps it was just this consideration of “the inclination of the guest” that contributed to Rumi’s success, making him one of the rare mystics with enough worldly awareness to be able to cater to his audience’s tastes.

In contrast to Rumi, Nuri and Hallaj were both tried for heresy in Baghdad during a period in the tenth century when the caliphate was going through a period of insecurity in its own

19 Ibid., 15.
21 Ibid., 166.
political power. Nuri and Hallaj are two Muslim mystics who, unlike Rumi, certainly do not demonstrate insight into or concern for their audience. Schimmel says of Nuri that he “was considered a heretic by the orthodox because he spoke of being a lover of God, a strong term that was misinterpreted by the theologians. His love was overwhelming, and in his enthusiasm he tended to ‘tear the veils’ and therefore expose himself to blame and danger”.\(^22\) For the same reason, it is said that one of the quieter, subtler Sufis, Junayd, tried to distance himself from the quintessential Muslim martyr and veil-tearer, Hallaj, “who was to become the model for all who are punished because they speak openly about the mysteries of love and unity. Junayd therefore, refined the art of speaking in ‘isharat,’ subtle allusion to the truth... a trend that became characteristic of later Sufi writing”,\(^23\) as we see later with Rumi. According to Schimmel, Hallaj’s trial, torture and execution during the tenth century demonstrates “the lover’s greatest sin: to divulge the secret of his love”,\(^24\) something that Rumi never would have done outright.

But even an understanding of the subtlety required was not always enough to save mystics from offending the orthodoxy. Meister Eckhart kept his mystical experiences private, if he had any, even though many find hints in his writings that they must have been central to his personal and intellectual development.\(^25\) Orthodox response to Eckhart represent a combination of the positive reception of Rumi and the negative reception of the Baghdad Sufis in the Islamic tradition. Albrecht Classen explains that Eckhart “was both well understood and profoundly misunderstood, which is vividly demonstrated by the genuine admiration he enjoyed throughout his teaching career and by the accusation of heresy which he experienced at the end of his life”

\(^23\) Ibid., 59.
\(^24\) Ibid., 64.
Despite the less than provocative means of delivering his message, it is not difficult to see how Eckhart could have run up against orthodox opposition solely for its content. According to Tobin, one of Eckhart’s main ideas was that “God is nothing and is something, but because the something that is God is so different from other somethings, it is much better to say that God is nothing - a nothing infinitely surpassing all something as we understand it” (21). Perhaps at the time that Eckhart wrote, this was simply too radical and clearly articulated an idea for the Church to absorb passively, so the result was charges of heresy, even without extremely provocative activity or outright claims of mystical experience by Eckhart. As with the Baghdad Sufis, the contemporary climate in which the mystic emerges can play just as important a role in his reception as factors within his control.

As demonstrated by these wide-ranging responses to mystics who espoused thematically very similar messages, the misinterpretation of religious intentions transplanted into a political context became more important than any malicious attack by the mystics on the orthodoxy. Some scholars, however, still insist that the motivation of mystics can be attributed squarely to disillusionment with contemporary interpretations of their religion. Smith illustrates this by claiming:

“The first century of Islam was very favourable to the spread of asceticism, on account of the general disgust with the growth of materialism, in contrast to the simple ideal of life taught and prescribed by Muhammad and his companions, and of dissatisfaction with the dissensions, both religious and political, with which the world of Islam was rent at this time” (154).

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Though it seems plausible, the situation is complex, and others are more cautious about assenting to this view. Karmustafa, for example, maintains that mystics and scholars sometimes engaged in debates over who had more claim to interpretive authority, but that this was the extent of most mystics’ willing engagement in controversy: “At times...this kind of friction was brought to the attention of politicians, but early mystics generally remained outside the vision of political rulers, since they rarely commanded a sizeable social following to form a political threat or possessed skills coveted by rulers. For their part, the mystics themselves generally preferred to remain aloof from politics”.  

It seems all one can safely generalize from this evidence is that the mystics who encountered problems with religious ‘orthodoxy’ did so by underestimating the social reaction some of their more radical statements would cause and overestimating the degree of open-mindedness among their religious peers. Monomaniacal focus on God led them to a realm of thought separate from that of the figures of authority in institutionalized religion, for whom political concerns were always salient. Mystics quested above all for personal contact and dissolution in God, so much so that they would not have been concerned with attacking institutions, which therefore could only be offended inadvertently. A sampling of mystics from two traditions seems to affirm that they all had one similar mission in mind, and that their fate in the external world can be explained not by any intention of theirs to change it, but by the coincidences of their individual circumstances. From smoother-tongued Rumi and Eckhart to the Baghdad Sufis, including the fiery Nuri and Hallaj and the more subdued Jaynad, the notion that “mystics in early Islam...generally assumed an ‘inner-worldly’, albeit critical orientation towards

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social life, and it would be erroneous to characterize their piety as anti-social”\(^{30}\) can be applied to mystics in general.

It is fair to characterize mysticism as a movement governed by aloofness toward profane affairs, so that it only encountered problems with authority in cases where mystics’ often confusing statements were public and obvious enough to offend the ears of especially insecure orthodoxy. Mystics were mainly offensive accidentally, and not because of any main mission to wrest authority from the hand of the institutions and restore the purity of their tradition. These accidents were more likely to occur based on two factors: the level of social awareness the individual possessed and the volatility of his social context. A combination of many complex factors worked in determining how the orthodoxy received mystics, including how easy and problematic it was for the ‘veil’ to be perceived as ‘torn,’ but the common denominator involved in many interactions or evaluations of interactions between the two groups seems to be an underestimation, whether by paranoid orthodoxy of certain scholars, or the possibility for a genuine, politically apathetic, independently religious focus on the mystic experience.

\(^{30}\) Ibid.
Works Cited


