Esoteric Islam

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Theosophical Society - Barend Voorham is an active member of the Theosophical Society Point Loma Blavatskyhouse. Besides giving lectures and courses, he is the author of the Dutch book Another Side of Islam. This article first appeared in Lucifer: The Messenger of LightThere is a lot of Islamic violence in the world, often among Muslims themselves. That is one reason people think Islam in itself is violent. But like any other religion, Islam is noble at its core, inspiring a spiritual and ethical way of life. Nevertheless, if a religion is interpreted in a sectarian way, it divides people instead of unifying them, and thus it becomes a source of evil. Therefore it is time to take a closer look at Islam and its principles in the hope that more people will discover its real fundamentals.

Voluntary Submission

The core idea of every religion is Unity. Practicing religion means to unify yourself with the divine and so with your fellow humans, for the divine is the unifying aspect of human consciousness.

This idea of Unity does not belong exclusively to Islam. On the contrary, it is at the core of every religion. That is why the Qur’an repeatedly refers to the other “peoples of the Book” and to other prophets that preached the same message. In fact the word Islam originates from the Arabic slm, the root of many words that relate to wholeness and peace. Most scholars translate Islam as voluntary submission to God. A Muslim is someone who submits himself — that is, lives in the perception of Unity.

Islam should not be regarded as a religion that started with Muhammad. Rather it is a current of that broad river of religious wisdom and compassion that has flowed through all cultures and eras. Many Jewish, Persian, and Christian influences can easily be found in Islam, but especially in its more philosophical side, it was strongly influenced by the Neoplatonist philosophers, particularly Plotinus. Plotinus, who lived in the third century AD, went to Persia in the company of the Roman emperor Gordian III and influenced a group of mystics that in later days were called the Sufis. Like Muslims in later centuries, Plotinus put a strong emphasis on the One. But for Plotinus the One was not a personal God, but an impersonal Principle. As we will see, that his concept of the One is more like the original concept of Allah than is the current Christian belief about God.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to describe the underlying Oneness of manifestation. Although one seeks for words, none fit. That is also the problem with the word God. In the way Christians use this word nowadays, God seems to be a kind of superhuman being, a personal God. But that was not always so.

Certain books from the early Christians, such as the Gnostic texts known as the Nag Hammadi library, provide a totally different view of God. Like Plotinus’s idea of the One, this God has no properties. It is not right to think of him as a god or something similar. Everything exists in him. He is illimitable, unsearchable, immeasurable, invisible, unnamable, and eternal, and no one can comprehend him. (See the Apocryphon of John in Robinson, 106.)

Every Muslim, whether Sunni or Shi’ite, whether living in Europe, Pakistan, America, or Arabia, uses the same word to express that Unity: Allah.

Allah: Unity

Allah is the Arabic word for God. And without any doubt many Muslims imagine Allah as a personal God, just as other believers of monotheistic religions, such as Christians, Jews or Sikhs, anthropomorphize their God. But is Allah, as presented in the Qur’an, a personal God?

All Muslims, whether they are illiterates or great scholars, highlight the Unity of Allah. Rightly so, because in many places in the Qur’an, and also in the ahadith (hadith in the singular) — the recorded traditions of the Prophet Muhammad— that Unity is also strongly emphasized. In the 112th sura (chapter) of the Qur’an we read:

Say, “He, God is One,

God, the Eternally Sufficient unto Himself.

He begets not; nor was He begotten.

And none is like unto Him.”

This verse leaves the impression not of a personal God but of a Principle of life that is everything and everyone.

Allah is One and cannot be divided. Therefore there cannot be a thing that is not Allah. So he cannot be a person, an ego. In fact it would be more accurate to refer to Allah with the impersonal pronoun it rather than with he.

Furthermore, Allah is eternal. He has always been and will always be. “He begetteth not nor was begotten.” When Allah does not beget, nothing flows forth. That means that he has created nothing. Allah cannot create, because then there would be something separated from Allah. Then there would have been two Unities, two Gods, and not one.

The only positive thing you can say about Allah is that Deity is there, eternal and unchangeable.

Some Muslims interpret this verse as being directed against Christianity, for Christians assert that Jesus is the only-begotten Son of God. To prove they are wrong, these pious Muslims quote the verse “Allah was not begotten.”

But the meaning of this verse goes much further. Allah has begotten nothing, for a principle cannot conceive, nor can it create. That is why the whole idea of Allah is beyond our comprehension. Just as Lao Tzu says that the true Tao — the infinite — cannot be named, this verse indicates that Allah is in fact everything but nothing in particular and thus beyond our understanding.

Allahu Akbar

This idea is also reflected in the saying Allahu akbar, which is usually translated as God is great. That phrase is frequently uttered to justify the most terrible things, but in fact it means that God is greater than anything we can conceive (Nasr, Heart of Islam, 5). Allah goes beyond our imagination, beyond the horizon of our existence. This is the same as the Hindu idea of Parabrahman, which means beyond Brahman, beyond the top of our hierarchy. The divine is greater than our grandest imagination.

But the Qur’an also states that Allah is also very close, closer than the jugular vein (50:16). There is also this statement: “Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God”(2:115). Some Muslim scholars place this verse in the context of the fact that at one point Muhammad changed the direction of prayer from Jerusalem to Mecca. That may be so, but Ali ibn Taleb, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, says that each Qur’anic verse has four meanings, four layers of interpretation (Corbin, 20). Without a doubt, then, this verse refers to more than just the direction of prayer. The divine is everywhere. Up, down, left, right, closer than your jugular vein and yet above and beyond your greatest imagination. Allahu akbar. The Deity is both transcendent and omnipresent at the same time: beyond or behind the phenomenal world. Too great to understand, even approximately. And on the other hand, divinity is everywhere in the phenomenal world. Everything is imbued with the divine. That is the image of the immanent Deity.

Shahada

The same picture is evoked by the shahada, the “testimony,” the first of the Five Pillars of Islam: La ilaha ill’allah. Literally this means: There is no God; there is one God. The usual translation is There is no God but God. A remarkable phrase, composed of both an affirmation and a denial. Like all paradoxes, it should be food for thought.

What is meant by the statement that there is no God, and there is one God?

Again it means that you can say nothing at all about Allah. Anything you say about it detracts from it. The only thing you can say about the Deity is that it is everything. It is boundless, timeless, unchanging.

If you meditate upon La ilaha ill’allah, you can come to profound insights. There is affirmation and negation, but affirmation and negation are only applicable in the manifest world. Allah is both the manifest and unmanifest, and at the same time it is not, for it is more.

So Allah is, as was said, the transcendent divinity, the force beyond the world, beyond the universe, beyond the phenomena, unknowable in its essence. The first part of the shahada — there is no God — relates to this aspect. It is too far, too high, too dark, and incomprehensible for us. Beyond our imagination.

And yet the divinity is present in the manifestation. It is a force that is everywhere. That is the part of the shahada that says there is one God.

This idea is also expressed in the following verse: “He is the First, and the Last, and the Outward, and the Inward; and He is Knower of all things” (57:3). The Outward is the manifestation, and the Inward is what is not manifested. This statement gives a picture of the Deity, who is both transcendent and immanent. In other words: being and nonbeing.

You might think that Allah is the synthesis between affirmation and negation, between nonbeing and being, between transcendent and immanent, but even the word synthesis does not express a correct understanding of Allah. Allah is Unity per se. God is absolute Unity, indivisible, and impossible to define. That Unity is the starting point, the principle, on which the whole of Islamic philosophy and mysticism is based.

Names of Allah

Allah is given a number of names, such as the Beneficent, the Merciful, the Seer, the Creator, and the King. In fact there are ninety-nine names, of which only eighty-four are mentioned in the Qur’an.

It may seem as if those names prejudice the vastness and infinity of Allah. After all, a name indicates a property. And if someone has a certain property, then he lacks another property and is therefore not boundless. A property — however exalted it may be — always implies a certain limitation. But previously we determined that the Allah Principle is the boundlessness itself. That is the reason why the Mu’tazili — an influential group in the early centuries of Islam — taught that each property or characteristic that you grant to God is a form of anthropomorphism and in fact polytheism, which is the greatest of all heresies. Indeed, when you consider the names as attributes of Allah, you interpret the idea of the boundlessness anthropomorphically. You modify the big picture according to your little human perceptions.

The Sufi sage Ibn Arabi, for example, who lived from 1165 to 1240, has a very different interpretation of these names. The central idea of his philosophy is, of course, the Unity of Allah. He calls it the Unity of Being. And since everything must be, by definition, Being, and since there are not two Beings, or two absolute truths, the universe must be permeated by Being, or is identical to Being. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Being, Allah, is the universe, or that the universe is Allah, because Allah is more than mere conditional existence.

Allah, says Ibn Arabi, is exalted above all properties, while manifest existence arises as a result of properties. The properties are not God, but, paradoxically, neither is God different from those properties. God manifests only by means of his names, but they never can manifest his essence. In its essence, in what you can call Necessary Being, Allah cannot be understood to experience nor in any way to become aware of anything. Nevertheless, from the divine flows forth life, and life returns back into it. That life is present as the names of Allah (Nasr, Introduction, 202).

Emanation

This idea of the flowing out or emanation of life, so well-known in early Islam, is deeply rooted in the doctrines of the Neoplatonists, especially Plotinus. The doctrine of emanation implies that each being is the starting point of a flow of life. It is like a source from which other beings are originated.

Imagine a being that creates an atmosphere in which less developed beings can manifest themselves. These are entities with the same characteristics as the Source-Being who created that atmosphere. In that sense, every entity is the result of a more highly developed being and is also the source for less developed entities. Thus we humans stem from higher beings and create an atmosphere for less developed entities. Some of those lesser beings are the trillions of cells that make up the body, or the atoms that compose the cells.

So we are the creators of those less developed beings, not in the literal sense, but in the sense that in our atmosphere they can live and have their being. In Arabian scriptures these lower beings are referred to as jinn: elemental, primitive, barely evolved beings, completely un-self-conscious.

In turn, we emerged, or rather were attracted, to the sphere of what we may call a divine being that comes out of a still nobler being, etc. In that way, hierarchies of life come to being, in which each link switches or transforms the life to a lower link. Each being is a link in a current of life.

The concept of the hierarchical structure of the universe is easy to find in Islam, albeit sometimes in symbolic form. Take for example the Night Journey, the journey that Muhammad made on the buraq — a mythical steed — to Jerusalem. If you study the teachings of the Ismaili, a group of Muslims who were very influential in the tenth and eleventh centuries, you will see that they emphasized these heavenly hierarchies, which they divided into seven steps, as in the Night Journey the Prophet was taken through seven heavens.

Light Verse

Let us now take a look at the famous Light verse (24:35) of the Qur’an.

God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is a niche, wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is as a shining star kindled from a blessed olive tree, neither of the East nor of the West. Its oil would well-nigh shine forth even if no fire had touched it. Light upon light.

Many scholars have studied this verse. Although you can interpret it in different ways, it seems clear that the divine life principle — the Light of the heavens and the earth — transforms by way of a number of links into the material world. The expression “Light upon Light” is a phrase you can also find in the work of Plotinus, four centuries before Muhammad (Plotinus, Enneads, 5.3.12.)

This doctrine of emanation was widespread in Islam. Ibn Sina (980–1037), known in the West as Avicenna, the great philosopher who has exerted so much influence on medieval thinking, uses the following comparison to make this thought clear. You can compare Allah — or Being — with the sun. The universe is formed by the rays of the sun. While these rays are different from the sun, at the same time they are nothing more than the sun. This comparison was probably well known among the Neoplatonists. It goes back to Plato himself (Republic 508c). It is basically what Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita: “I establish this universe with a single portion of myself, and remain separate”(Bhagavad Gita, 10:42).

The Ummah

All Muslim ethics are based on the doctrine of the Oneness of Allah, combined with that of emanation.

If Unity is the basis of all life, we have all emerged from the same source, so we are essentially the same. We consist of the same life. So we are all brothers. We must live for each other. We should not only help each other but render service to the whole community.

In Islam the community is called Ummah. To see this in its proper perspective, we need to place it in historical context. In the Arabia of the time of the Prophet, there was no feeling of collective interest. It was a time of tribalism. Every tribe had its principles and laws and was almost constantly at war with the other ones. The message of Muhammad was to bring about unity. Every man, every nation, every tribe is a facet of the Unity. So the Ummah is not only the community of Muslims, but of all human beings. As the Qur’an states:

O mankind! Truly We created you from a male and a female, and We made you peoples and tribes that you may come to know one another. (49:13)

Mankind was one community. (2:213)

According to a hadith, Muhammad also said that an Arab is not better than a non-Arab, a white man no better than a black or vice versa, except in terms of piety and good deeds.

When Muhammad was forced to flee from Mecca to Medina, where he became the leader of the Muslims who had fled with him, a document was drafted under his leadership, which is nowadays known as the Constitution of Medina. It expressly stated that the community does not only consist of Muslims but also of Jews, Christians, and pagans residing in the city. It was a universal community, to which people of all faiths and races belonged.

A community can only function harmoniously if people respect each other. So you should never force someone to accept your faith.

It may be dangerous to quote Qur’anic texts as evidence for an opinion, especially out of context. Fanatics do that too much. Yet the famous verse 2:256 — “There is no coercion in religion” — can hardly be explained in any other way than by cherishing freedom of belief for everybody.

Polytheism

The importance of Unity in Islamic thought explains its aversion to polytheism, the belief in various gods.

It is true that the Qur’an describes a whole army of archangels and angels. According to tradition, the Qur’an itself was dictated by the archangel Jibril or Gabriel. So there is no doubt that there are beings that are more advanced than humans. The Qur’an tells also about beings that are less developed than humans: the jinn. But this whole hierarchy forms a unity.

This emphasis on the unity of Allah leads to the rejection of any other gods. The gods in ancient Arabia were all tribal in nature. Each tribe had its own god, who was of supreme importance, even to the detriment of other tribes. Hence ethical practice was limited to one’s own tribe. There were no ethics that applied universally. As a result, there was much war and discord.

But because of the hijra — Muhammad’s flight from Mecca to Medina — Islam acquired a universal character. Initially the preaching of Muhammad was only addressed to the Meccans, but now he spoke to all mankind. Every tribe had its own god. If you denied the existence of those gods, you put an end to the tribal sense of separateness. Polytheism was thus rejected as being a reversion to the separateness of living in one’s own tribe.

Compare this with today’s national symbols. The symbol of the U.S. is an eagle, of France, a rooster, of Spain, a bull, and of the Netherlands, a lion. Suppose that these nations believe that their symbol has great power. They pray to it. They beg it for prosperity. In doing so, they isolate themselves from other nations, with hatred and war as a result.

You can counteract this by saying that all those symbols are illusions and false. There is Unity. People need to know each other and learn from each other, so they can better shape the Unity.

An important conclusion that can be drawn from the doctrine of emanation is that the divine is not outside but within us. When all is One, there can be nothing but Oneness. So every being is rooted in the Oneness. Rooted in a common divine Source, the divine is in all.

Nevertheless, there is a great variety of beings in the world. Humans are different from animals, animals from plants, etc. Humans too differ from one another. The doctrine of emanation explains this fact as well. Every entity gives shape to the Unity in its own unique way. Therefore beings always differ in their outward form. Because of those differences, they can learn from each other.

Evolution

The Light Verse shows that life — the Light of the heavens and the earth — is cascading down through various steps to the material world. The divine falls, as it were, into the fabric of materiality. As the Qur’an says: “Truly We created man in the most beautiful stature, then We cast him to the lowest of the low” (95:4–5).

This idea may be more understandable in view of the hadith, popular among the Sufis, that the Prophet had said that all things were created in darkness, but every being attracted light to itself according to its ability, and by doing so was illuminated. Every being comes from the depths of the depth, from the unknown transcendent Deity. That is the aspect of the shahada that says there is no God. That is to say: there is no God for us, because the abyss for us is formless, it is the great Void, as Buddhists say. It is nothing, in the sense of no thing. But then a being comes into manifestation, just a fire throws off sparks, or, as Ibn Sina says, the sun radiates rays. Every being is a spark of the divine light. The gloss of every man is like a sparkle of the Deity. That is the aspect of the shahada that says there is one God. Everything is the one God, because everything comes from that depth into being and is therefore at the core of the core of his being that God.

This idea is expressed in another way. A tradition states that every human being is in fact a Muslim, one who submits himself. “When the Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their loins, their progeny and made them bear witness concerning themselves, ‘Am I not your Lord?’ they said, ‘Yea, we bear witness’” (Qur’an 7:172).

Consequently man is basically good. Few doctrines erode ethics more than those which say that man is always inclined to be evil. No. In the depths of his heart man is a noble creature. But apparently he does not realize this yet. He must learn to be who he really is. And in order to learn, he has descended into the fabric of materiality. He became “the lowest of the low.”

So the being, divine in origin, descends into matter. Thus it loses the divine state, as well as the knowledge of where it once resided.

How can it learn? How can it remember that it has to return to that divine state? Through knowledge.

Knowledge and Return

Knowledge, said Muhammad, is light (Nasr, Garden of Truth, 32). The ink of the scholar is therefore more valuable than the blood of the martyr, according to a hadith.

It is obvious that many cruelties executed by the so-called jihadis have nothing to do with genuine Islam. Many Islamic scholars have noticed this. In September 2014 more than a hundred prominent Muslims wrote an open letter to the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In that letter, they condemn the actions of ISIS and specify ways in which ISIS is violating Islamic teachings. (See <http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/>.)

Islam sharply disapproves of cruelty and revenge. As the Sufi sheikh Sharfuddin Maneri says: “Find him that flees for you; forgive him that offends you; do good unto him that does not want to bestow you anything” (Maneri, 74).

Islam clearly teaches that not war but study opens the path to Allah. That’s why there is no other religion that more emphasizes the accumulation of knowledge than Islam.

The light of the heavens and the earth streams through links into the manifestation. The more it descends, the darker it gets. Sometimes, unfortunately, it is almost completely extinguished. Then people hate each other; then they live in the separation of their tribes. Whether they give their tribes the name of their religion, their country, or race, is actually an afterthought. They believe that others outside the tribe are different, evil, heretical. They kill each other. Then there is no knowledge, and so there is no light.

But we can come to knowledge. Then we return to where we came from, and we learn to live in the light that is in us.

The whole of the Qur’an, the whole of Islam, particularly its mystical branch, is dominated by tauba. This Arabic word is often translated as repentance or remorse, but a better word may be return. If it is true that all souls emanated from Allah, then they will return to the Source one day.

That is the meaning of religion. You will reconnect to the Source from which you come. We return to Him, we read constantly in the Qur’an.

The methods for “going home” are the rules of exoteric Islam: the Five Pillars, which you can find in every book on this faith. But for those who want to go faster, there is the esoteric path, such as the different tariqas (paths) of the Sufi masters. They practice poverty, asceticism, detachment, and meditation.

Nafs: The Lower Self

The difficulty is that the light inside oneself is dimmed by what is called the nafs.

Man does have a spark of light in his soul, but that soul is composed of several parts. There is also a part of that soul that identifies itself with the earthly, the transient. That part is the nafs. (On the nafs, see Schimmel, 112–14).

The nafs did not exist in the Garden of Eden, the heavenly state, the initial stage in human evolution, when we still lived in Allah and were created in the highest state.

Then we descended. In this process of emanation in which we became the “lowest,” the nafs was developed. The nafs is the instrument with which we can work in this outer world. We identified ourselves, however, with this external instrument, so that we have forgotten who we really are.

The nafs is described as the seat of the passions. In many Sufi writings it is presented as a very real thing. It sometimes lives as a separate entity outside the body. It is compared with the cruel Pharaoh, so it is the tyrant in us. It is compared to a woman (nafs in Arabic is a feminine noun) that seduces men. More often it takes the form of an animal, frequently a pig.

Those who are aware of the composite constitution of the human being, as Theosophy teaches, understand this metaphor all too well. The personal man may easily focus himself on his animal nature and then banishes the divinity.

Sometimes the nafs takes the form of hypocrisy. It comes with the Qur’an and rosary in one hand and with the scimitar and dagger in the sleeve, says the Sufi poet Jalaleddin Rumi. Hence you find many warnings in Islamic literature not to give in to the desires of the nafs.

Yet it is not that we should eliminate the nafs, not in the absolute sense, but we must not listen to its voice. We should not be affected by it. Nafs is the element in us that attaches us to phenomena. Therefore we must rise above it.

The fight against this nafs is the true jihad, the true holy war. A hadith says: the worst enemy — the nafs — is between your sides. And the Prophet Muhammad have said, when he returned from a battlefield, “We are going now to the jihad akbar — the great battle, the fight against the nafs.”

In the Qur’an we read: “But I absolve not my own soul. Surely the soul commands to evil, save whom my Lord may show mercy” (12:53).

Nafs is here translated as soul, which could be misleading, for one could draw the wrong conclusion: that man is prone to evil. It is the nafs, the lower part of the soul that, left to itself, focuses on the material side of life.

But as evidenced by the Qur’an, the nafs may be also used for good. Live in unity and you win the great jihad. Sufis love to compare the attempts to master the nafs with the training of a dog. The lower aspects should not be slain; they must be controlled, so that they can serve us.

Rumi compares that struggle with a man trying to maneuver his camel in the right direction, for example to the tent of the beloved. If you live in the knowledge of Allah, the soul obeys its master.

Extinction

Returning to the Source is described as a journey full of perils and temptations.

It is often expressed in symbolic language, as in the famous allegory The Conversation of the Birds by Farid ad-Din Attar. In this inspiring story, the birds — who represent souls — set out to find the mysterious Simurgh. They pass through seven valleys. The last is that of destruction. What does that mean?

It is basically the same as nirvana. Nirvana literally means blown out or extinguished. But what is extinguished?

The lower part of man. The lower principles are destroyed. The nafs is destroyed. Only when that is the case, you can merge into the Unity. There is an absorption in pure cosmic Being.

The Sufis use this image of destruction. In Arabic it is called fana, or fana’ fi-allah, which means annihilation in God. But to fully understand this, they link it with baqa’ bi-allah, being eternal in God. You destroy the personal man, you detach yourself from all the limited, oppressive shadows and illusions. In fact you detach from all emanations. And because of that destruction you live in Allah. You are aware of the all-encompassing unity of life. You do not see yourself as a separate being, but as a drop in the sea of life.

Wherever there is a form of “I,” where one’s own “I” desires to be destroyed, where that “I” wants to live in Allah, there is still a form of illusion. When the ego is on the foreground, man limits himself.

You can never wake up the divine completely within yourself, if the “I” is still the dominant factor in your consciousness. No one describes this more clearly and beautifully than Rumi, the greatest of the Sufi poets:

One went to the door of the Beloved and knocked.

A voice asked: “Who is there?”

He answered: “It is I.”

The voice said: “There is no room here for me and thee.”

The door was shut.

After a year of solitude and deprivation

this man returned to the door of the Beloved.

He knocked.

A voice from within asked: “Who is there?”

The man said: “It is Thou.”

The door was opened for him. (Shah, 189)

The voyage does not end. After all, there is boundlessness, so there can never be limits. Indeed there is yet another stage beyond fana’ fi-allah and baqa’ bi-allah. It is the journey from God with God. This means that after the destruction of the “I,” when you live in Allah, you descend again into the world of phenomena. You remain conscious of the Unity, but nevertheless live in the multiplicity of the outer world. Therefore we should not live for our own salvation, but should identify ourselves with the whole, the Ummah. Compassion is the highest form of unification.

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